

Jesus as a Spiritual Path for the Twenty-first Century

**A Professional Project
presented to
the Faculty of
Claremont School of Theology**

**In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Ministry**

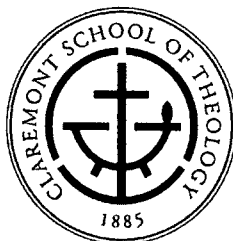
**by
Sally S. Burton**

May 2014

© 2014

Sally S. Burton

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED



This professional project completed by

SALLY S. BURTON

has been presented to and accepted by the
faculty of Claremont School of Theology in
partial fulfillment of the requirements of the

DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

Faculty Committee

Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, Chairperson
Jeanyne B. Sletton

Dean of the Faculty

Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook

May 2014

ABSTRACT

JESUS AS A SPIRITUAL PATH FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by

Sally S. Burton

The way of Jesus is still a meaningful spiritual path for people in the twenty-first century. For some though, it has been obscured by dominant theological interpretations that do not make sense to many post modern people. Some church goers recite creeds that they can not give intellectual assent to. Others have left the church because of patriarchal language and systems that shut them out emotionally and intellectually from the worship experience.

A influential theological teaching about Jesus has been that God had a plan to save human beings from their sinful nature. The plan required the sacrifice of someone who was without sin. Jesus, God's only son, was obedient in giving his life for this plan through his crucifixion. In that way Jesus is said to have saved us from our sins. This understanding of the purpose of Jesus' life is usually paired with the idea that one day in the future Jesus will return triumphantly to set things right in the world. He will judge the living and the dead at that time.

A goal of this project/thesis is to engage with the ideas of some progressive, contemporary Christian writers and thinkers and to share their possibly transformative ideas for understanding Jesus and his life's purpose and passion. The vehicle for sharing the concepts is three adult education opportunities offered over three consecutive weeks. Surveys before and after the classes is a tool for measuring possible transformation of thought. This study reveals a desire for and appreciation of

progressive theology and the time and space to discuss it with peers within one congregation. The study also indicates that transformation of thought within a diverse group of people is unpredictable and varied.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter

1. Clearing the Path.....	1
Introduction.....	1
Thesis.....	1
The Problem Addressed by the Project.....	1
Work Previously Done in the Field.....	5
Scope and Limitations.....	11
Procedure for Integration.....	13
Chapter Outlines.....	14
2. Progressive and Feminist Theologians Perspective.....	16
3. Process Theologians Perspective.....	29
4. Religious Education and Spiritual Formation.....	38
5. Description of the Project.....	48
6. Conclusion and Recommendations.....	55
Appendix A: Week One-Jesus as Wisdom Teacher.....	59
Appendix B: Week Two- Jesus as Liberator.....	68
Appendix C: Week Three-Jesus the Christ.....	78
Appendix D: Survey Questions.....	87
Bibliography.....	88

Chapter 1

Clearing the Path

Introduction

The path of Christianity can be an empowering and liberating one. At times though it has been presented in ways that are off-putting for some people, such as women or gay and lesbian people. People who have been relegated to the margins of the church can be invited to the center by a shift in perspective and through religious education.

Various disciplines of study, including progressive and feminist theology, process theology, religious education and spiritual formation can provide avenues of inclusion and broadening perspectives. A review of literature and an adult education series presented here explores the potential available to those seeking an entry into Christianity that has not been open to everyone previously.

Thesis

The thesis for my Doctor of Ministry project is as follows: "Given that certain pervasive and popular theological interpretations of Jesus' life and ministry present barriers to the Christian faith for some people, this project undertakes to design a series of workshops that will present more liberating perspectives and enable pathways to spiritual growth and transformative empowerment."

The Problem Addressed by the Project

The problem addressed by this project is that pathways to spiritual growth and transformative empowerment within the Christian faith are obstructed by theological interpretations of the life and ministry of Jesus that are not liberating for many people.

I currently serve as a pastor at First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ in San Bernardino, CA. I have been working at this church for five years. The United Church of Christ has a long history of extending an inclusive invitation to all people. I work with another woman pastor. It is an Open and Affirming church and the people there appreciate progressive theology. The degree of appreciation varies among congregants, but for the most part progressive theology is highly valued.

While change is difficult for most people this congregation tolerates it surprisingly well. There has been a collaborative effort by the pastors and others to create renewal in the church and we are seeing a lot of growth and increasing diversity at the moment. Workshops offered in the area about Church Vitality are always well attended by the pastors and congregants. For the most part people are open and interested in learning. A resource that has been quite helpful for us is The Center for Progressive Renewal, led by Rev. Michael Piazza and Rev. Cameron Trimble. We've attended workshops they have offered and also had a weekend visit at our church by Rev. Piazza. We have thoughtfully and consistently implemented many of their suggestions. Some of these ideas include using technology if it enhances the message of the sermon or themes

for the day. That might include using a short clip from a film. We have followed their advice to avoid dead space in the worship service by singing as the children come forward for Story Time, having the next person who is to read, sing or speak ready to begin, and reviewing with a worship planning team what worked or did not work in the previous week's service.

The growth in new members and increasing diversity has been good. The problem I see is that many of our new friends are either unchurched with no clear theological foundation, or they come to us with a patriarchal theology that is generally out of synch with the United Church of Christ's outlook that "God is Still Speaking." Many join our congregation because we are welcoming of all people but do not have exposure to the theology that underpins the Open and Affirming stance. It is wonderful that many diverse people have found healing in a welcoming congregation, but enhancing some theological unity in the congregation is a goal.

Many people who can be said to have a progressive theology may also benefit from honing an understanding of what Jesus was passionate about imparting to his followers. If the idea that Jesus' purpose in his life was to die for our sins is not meaningful for some people, there might be something more significant to be discovered.

My purpose is not to impose a way of thinking on people. I want to offer some other, possibly more expansive or relevant ways of understanding Jesus, his teachings and his ministry than have often been put forward. I believe that

Jesus' way of teaching was not to impose thought on people, but to offer ways to allow them to discover spiritual insights. That is a guide for me as I think about creating a project. I hope to present concepts that might be new in a non-coercive way so that the ideas will be inviting for participants to consider.

Familiar and often popular ways of understanding Jesus that have been taught tend to invite people to look for God outside of themselves, to understand God in anthropomorphic ways (powerful male), to wait for Jesus or God to fix things rather than be empowered to help to create the realm of God here on earth with God's help. Many people have been led to believe that God sends sorrowful events such as illness, job loss, or natural disasters to test our character or teach us a lesson. These are problems because they distract people from what could be a meaningful spiritual path leading to growing insight and compassion. Spiritually empowered and enlightened people can work to heal some of the wounds of the earth, such as poverty, ignorance, and violence. Jesus's way or path towards loving God and loving our neighbor as ourselves is greatly needed in churches and in the world today. The way has been clouded.

People have more choices now than ever before for how to spend their time. It is not a given today that most people will want to go to church on Sunday and attendance is dwindling in many Christian churches. Maybe that is a good thing in some ways. If old ways of doing things are no longer compelling it is time for something new. Jesus is still a numinous and healing figure whose empowering message continues to shine through the layers of dogma placed

over him through many generations. Finding new ways to present that gift to people of the twenty-first century is a worthy goal.

Work Previously Done in the Field

This project attempts to consider some of Jesus' ways of teaching and the liberating insight they have for us today. Work previously done in the field by various scholars and theologians will help to illuminate the problem of traditional theological interpretations about Jesus that are not compelling for some people today. In her book, *Church in the Round Feminist Interpretation of the Church*, feminist theologian Letty Russell writes that a church that speaks about liberation through Christ must offer freedom from oppression for all men and women or it is not truly committed to justice or reflective of Christ.¹ Letty Russell writes as a person who has a long relationship with the church. It is a love/hate relationship. Her as a woman because of patriarchal, hierarchal traditions and language. She loves the church because it has been a place where the story of Jesus Christ and the good news of God's love has been shared.²

Ms. Russell writes that the church is a sign of the coming fulfillment of God's promise for New Creation. As a sign, it is always provisional and it is in constant need of renewal in order to make an authentic witness to God's love and justice in changing historical, political, economic, and social contexts.

¹ Letty M. Russell, *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church* (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 43.

² Russell, *Church in the Round*, 11.

Sometimes, she says, “It is in need of a revolution.”³ It is possible that one of the reasons many churches are declining in membership and struggling to stay alive is because the witness they make is no longer authentic. Authenticity is something sought after in a world where many interactions are superficial. People desire more than information or things to believe about God when they come to church. People long for an experience of God and they desire meaning in their lives.

Biblical scholar, Marcus Borg has written about the fact that many people no longer find certain traditional tenets of the Christian church meaningful. He describes two paradigms in his book, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith, How We Can be Passionate Believers Today*. There is the Earlier Paradigm and the Emerging Paradigm. He summarizes the differences with the following chart:⁴

	<u>Earlier Paradigm</u>	<u>Emerging Paradigm</u>
<i>The Bible's Origin</i>	A divine product with divine authority	A human response to God
<i>Biblical Interpretation</i>	Literal-factual	Historical and metaphorical
<i>The Bible's function</i>	Revelation of doctrine and morals	Metaphorical and sacramental

³ Russell, *Church in the Round*, 13-14.

⁴ Marcus Borg, *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith; How We Can be Passionate Believers Today* (San Francisco,: HarperSanFrancisco, 2003), 15.

<i>Christian life</i>	An afterlife and	Transformation in this life
<i>emphasis</i>	what to believe or	in this life through
	do to be saved	relationship with God

Marcus Borg has a passion to set out a new way of seeing Christianity for those for whom the earlier paradigm does not make sense. Marcus Borg writes about the centrality of Jesus in the heart of Christianity. Within the earlier paradigm the gospels are read literally as though they are straight forward historical documents. An image of Jesus emerges that many are familiar with. He is the only Son of God, the promised messiah who will come again and the purpose of his life was to die for our sins. There is an emphasis on miracles, such as the virgin birth and physical bodily resurrection. It also emphasizes that Jesus is the only way of salvation, making Christianity the one true religion. This image is unpersuasive for many Christians.

In the book, *The Wisdom Jesus Transforming Heart and Mind a New Perspective on Christ and His Message*, by Episcopal priest, Cynthia Bourgeault, the author acknowledges that when new information challenges traditional or orthodox ways of thinking it can cause disorientation and confusion.⁵ People generally dislike change, especially if they have been taught by those in authority that certain beliefs are sacred. That is unfortunate because renewal in thinking can deepen an understanding of the valuable spiritual path that Jesus offers. The world needs spiritually aware people if we are going to

⁵ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind; A New Perspective on Christ and His Message* (Boston: New Seeds Books, 2008),1.

deal with our horribly violent culture and begin to heal the wounds of the earth. Many people look for a heavenly reward instead of working to bring the realm of God here on earth with God's help. They do not understand that they are meant to be empowered and courageous as disciples of Jesus.

Jesus is like an iceberg in some ways. We see aspects of him but there is always much more to discover. Cynthia Bourgeault describes Jesus as a master of an ancient spiritual tradition called wisdom. She says that all of the knowledge we have been given in the form of correct beliefs about Jesus actually gets in the way.⁶ The wisdom tradition is concerned with the transformation of the whole human being, moving from egocentricity towards love and compassion. The wisdom tradition seeks to move people from a stance of judgment of those who are different to seeing the interconnectedness of humanity. "This was the message that Jesus, apparently out of nowhere, came preaching and teaching, a message that was radical in its own time and remains equally radical today."⁷ This is the message that has been covered over and obscured by doctrine such as "Jesus died for our sins." British writer G.K. Chesterton said, "Christianity isn't a failure; it just hasn't been tried yet." If we are going to avoid annihilation from ecological disaster or nuclear weapons now would be a good time to rediscover and delve into Jesus' way of spiritual transformation.

⁶ Bourgeault, *Wisdom Jesus*, 3.

⁷ Bourgeault, *Wisdom Jesus*, 4.

In her book, *On the Mystery Discerning God in Process*, process theologian, Catherine Keller writes about putting the breathing room back in Christology. She suggests an interval of *ruach*, right between Jesus and Christ. Otherwise the meaning of each of these terms gets dissipated: one a proper name, the other a symbolic title.⁸ The living, breathing Spirit of Christ can and will bring renewal if we can find that opening for her to move. The United Church of Christ is fond of saying "God is still speaking." Systems that are not open to change and renewal become stagnant and begin to die. A God that still speaks is a living, inviting God.

Catherine Keller also speaks of Jesus' role as a wisdom teacher. She says that a wisdom parable becomes a parable for a third way. It points somewhat unpredictably beyond any absolutism of an unquestioned truth of revelation. She says, "Jesus was always deconstructing the absolutes of his day, the do's, the don'ts, and I believes. To deconstruct is not to destroy but to expose our constructed presumptions."⁹ Keller writes, "Salvation is in process or it is not happening. It is an open-ended inter activity and a mystery in process: a mystery that we see veiled by the processed Christ but revealed in the living one."¹⁰

In his book, *The Death of the Mythic God The Rise of Evolutionary Spirituality*, lawyer, author and mystic, Jim Marion says that Jesus taught at an

⁸ Catherine Keller, *On the Mystery: Discerning God in Process* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 136.

⁹ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 138.

¹⁰ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 148

extremely high level of spirituality or Christ Consciousness. Those who interpreted and recorded his teachings were often at a much lower level of understanding.¹¹ That has resulted in people often missing the importance of the confidence Jesus has in us to grow in wisdom, compassion and understanding ourselves. Jesus' unique divine stature has been so emphasized that many of us do not dare to consider growing in Christ consciousness ourselves or as the apostle Paul put it, "putting on the mind of Christ." Jim Marion points out that Jesus died trying to teach us that this is our task as followers of his.¹² The future of humanity and the earth depends on our reclaiming the power of the Holy Spirit that Jesus breathed upon his disciples and in our using it to bring peace, compassion and healing to the world.

John Shelby Spong, author and former Episcopal Bishop of Newark writes of the importance of freeing Jesus from outdated concepts and explanations from the past. He says of people who strongly defend the answers of yesterday, "They do not understand that they have actually entombed Jesus in the caskets of another world, another time, another place."¹³ He says that explanations always assume the worldview of when they were created. When the worldview dies, the explanation dies as well. Spong sees a need to free Jesus from the shackles of religious views of yesterday that are no longer

¹¹ Jim Marion, *The Death of the Mythic God: The Rise of Evolutionary Spirituality* (Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2004), 151.

¹² Marion, *Death of the Mythic God*, 163.

¹³ John Shelby Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious* (New York: Harper One, 2007), 8.

meaningful or life-giving for many people. Then the power of the Jesus experience will be able to emerge in new ways for our day and time.¹⁴

Scope and Limitations

The project took place on three consecutive Sundays, September 15, 22 and 29, 2013 at First Congregational Church United Church of Christ in San Bernardino, CA. The optimal time for attendance at Adult Education opportunities at this church is after worship services on Sundays. Participation in the workshops was open to all adults who wish to take part. People were encouraged to participate through announcements from the pulpit on Sundays, invitations in the church's e-news, reminders at events such as Church Council meetings and through friendly verbal invitation. Efforts were made to encourage a commitment from a reasonable number of participants while acknowledging that people are busy and have many options for spending their weekend time.

This congregation generally has about 90 to 100 people in worship. Most members are Caucasian but there are also African American, Hispanic and Bangladeshi members. Diversity is also seen in religious backgrounds that include Baptist, Roman Catholic, Universalist Unitarian, no church background, Church of Christ, Congregational, United Church of Christ and Buddhist. It is an Open and Affirming congregation with heterosexual, transgender and gay and lesbian members. There are a small amount of people in their twenties, several people in their thirties with young children, many baby boomers and several

¹⁴ Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, 284-85.

retired people. Many of the members of the congregation have joined recently and others are long time congregants.

With all the diversity of theological backgrounds within the congregation I humbly suggest that a adult education workshop that explores the passion of Jesus in his teaching might be a unifying factor in this particular church that has recently been through significant change and growth in new members. It may bring transformation in thinking about Jesus as the provider of a spiritual path of increasing compassion in the world through renewal of the mind. Much has been written about these concepts and the purpose of this project is to synthesize some of the writing and offer it to people in the church in ways that are inviting, interesting and accessible.

When considering Jesus one naturally thinks of God and how Jesus revealed the nature of the Divine. Jesus seems to have experienced God as an intimate, compassionate being, rather than a remote or angry deity. The topic of God is too large to include in this project in any depth. The focus remains ways to consider Jesus and his passion and teaching that may be compelling and empowering for people in the twenty-first century.

With this project theological concepts which may be considered unorthodox or edgy have been shared and discussed with adult members of a progressive mainstream congregation. This will be discussed more fully in a later chapter, but examples include the idea that Jesus may not be the only human to have reflected what is called Christ light and there were women

disciples as well as men. Some of the ideas shared are commonly heard in seminary classes but rarely talked about in congregations. Discussion questions encouraged engagement with the material and animated conversation. Opinions and thoughts were further shared through surveys designed to measure any change in thought or beliefs as a result of the workshops.

Procedure for Integration

Conversation partners to inform the educational opportunity will be drawn from the disciplines of feminist theology, process theology, religious education and progressive Biblical scholarship. Library research will be employed to engage these various disciplines. Writers in these fields that will be consulted have compelling perception and understanding that is insightful for people in postmodern times.

A series of workshops has been designed and presented over three Sunday mornings in September 2013 that consider various ways of understanding Jesus that can be empowering and transformative in the twenty-first century. The workshop participants were only a small group of members who did not fully reflect the generational or multicultural composition of the church.

An evaluative survey was conducted before and after the three week experience to measure any change or transformation that may occur as a result of the class. In order to secure the validity of both the workshop curriculum and the questionnaire the contents were discussed with respected scholars in the

field of Religious Education. It was field tested by people who were not participating in the workshop to test for clarity and ease of use. Then the revised questionnaire was used in the project research.

Small group discussions and opportunities for sharing with the larger group as a whole were very animated and yielded information and new insights that emerged during the workshop.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1 will identify the thesis, the problem addressed by the project, the importance of the problem, definition of terms, work previously done in the field, scope and limitations of the project, the procedure for integration, and brief chapter outlines.

Chapter 2 will reflect selected readings from feminist and other progressive theologians to consider the insights that they bring to a discussion about Jesus providing a meaningful path for spiritual growth in the twenty-first century.

Chapter 3 will cover some of what Process theologians bring to a discussion about interpreting Jesus and his teaching.

Chapter 4 will explore the field of Religious Education and the ways that this discipline can aid in Spiritual Formation of adults and transformation through education.

Chapter 5 will describe the project, present data collected, and analyze results.

Chapter 6 will offer a conclusion and recommendations to other churches who might choose to use the curriculum offered for the project.

Chapter 2

Progressive and Feminist Theologians Perspective

Jesus has been enshrouded in patriarchal concepts and language for most of the history of Christianity. He has been described as now sitting, presumably enthroned, at the right hand of the Father. It has been taught that he will come again in clouds of glory to judge the living and the dead. It is not an approachable image or one that is inspiring to attempt to emulate. It seems so very different from the earthly Jesus who enjoyed good food and lively gatherings. He liked exchanging thoughts and ideas with all sorts of people. Often he spent time and engaged in conversation with the wrong sorts of people, according to the social mores of his time. The Jesus who is now said to share in ultimate power with the strong, authoritarian male deity and who will judge us one day is so different from the man who made people feel whole and accepted as they were.

The patriarchal images given to Jesus obscure his healing message, perhaps especially for women in the church. Patricia Lynn Reilly writes, "Clearly, God the Father has not always been faithful to women. It is a miracle of trust that women have remained within traditional religion. Our suspicion is the gift we offer to the church today. Perhaps as we shout out our questions, we give voice to the One whose face has been obscured and whose ways have been distorted. As did the prophets of old, we call the religious community to confront its idolatry of God the Father. We call on religion to remember its original

lessons.”¹ Sometimes one has to search through layers to discover the original lessons of Jesus and the community that formed around him. The beauty of his vision of an egalitarian, compassionate community of empowerment and non-violence still shines through, even as it has been covered over by patriarchal theological interpretations. Theologians Dorothee Soelle and Luise Schottroff have said that when women are refused ordination it goes against the original spirit and teaching of Jesus. The “no” is an “I do not know you” which the present-day Peter says to the living Christ.²

Some of these patriarchal interpretations began to solidify in the year 325 CE when the Roman emperor Constantine called for a council to meet at his summer residence on the Lake of Nicaea. He had hope that the decisions reached by the bishops gathered there would begin an era of unity and harmony for the Roman Catholic Church. Constantine had taken a hard stand against paganism by banning the building of any new temples, the consulting of oracles, and animal sacrifices. With the Council of Nicaea he hoped that the bishops would communicate and agree upon the nature of Christ. Anyone who went against this sanctioned view could then be punished by the state.³

At this time a influential bishop named Arius said that Jesus had earned his divine nature through a sort of promotion due to his moral growth and

¹ Patricia Lynn Reilly, *A God Who Looks Like Me: Rediscovering a Woman-Affirming Spirituality* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1995), 90.

² Dorothy Soelle and Luis Schottroff, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 52.

³ Richard E. Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God: The Struggle to Define Christianity during the Last Days of Rome* (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999), 68-72

obedience to God.⁴This was a huge controversy of the time. From the Arian perspective it was important that Jesus not be God because as a human he was a wonderful role model for people. He showed a way that ordinary people could also become sons or daughters of God.⁵Arianism had a popular base among city artisans, workers, sailors, merchants, monks and young people. It represented a radical impulse in Roman society to infuse ordinary life with the spirit of Christ so that society could be renewed.⁶

The emperor, Constantine was determined to outlaw Arianism.⁷ In November of 380 a new emperor, Theodosius came to Constantinople. He issued an edict called *Nullis haereticis*, no heretics. This edict came down very hard on Arians and others thought to be heretics.⁸One year after he had banned Arianism, Theodosius officially declared that Nicene Christianity, with a majestic Christ incorporated into the Godhead, a pessimistic view of human nature and power resting in the hands of a few within a great hierarchy, was the official religion of the state. Jesus had officially become God.⁹

The great power structure with its doctrinal unity allowed the Roman Catholic church to survive through the ages, but it changed the way Jesus was perceived. Having grown up in that denomination I recall that we were not taught about stories from the gospels. We learned doctrine, such as the concept of the

⁴ Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*, 55.

⁵ Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*, 9.

⁶ Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*, 218.

⁷ Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*, 220.

⁸ Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*, 221.

⁹ Rubenstein, *When Jesus Became God*, 224-25.

Trinity or the Nicene Creed, which I now recognize as anti-Arian points of view. In that world Jesus was depicted as clothed in imperial robes, holding a scepter and wearing a crown. He has been moved so far from the amazingly wise and God infused rabbi who sought to empower everyday people whom he encountered and interacted with. He was made to seem married to human power structures and a defender of human orthodoxy and status quo.

Rosemary Radford Ruether points out that much imagery about a messiah was originally drawn from ancient near eastern kingship language. The prophets had made this language a judgement upon existing kings and a hope for a new social order. But when Christianity became an imperial religion, Ruether says this kingship language was used to sacrilize existing Christian monarchs as expressions of divine kingship and representatives of Christ on earth. The meaning of language changes in different contexts. When imperial Christianity presents human hierarchies of power as expressions of Christ's reign, servanthood language is used to reinforce the subjugation of some oppressed people and this is done in Christ's name. Prophetic language is then used to justify the interests of the status quo.¹⁰

Ms. Ruether points out that Jesus rejected such distortions of messianic language. He rejected kingly or chauvinistic titles for himself and talked instead of the Messiah as Suffering Servant, even to the point of giving one's life for the sake of others. When Jesus' disciples, James and John asked to be given

¹⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993), 28-29.

special positions of power in the Kingdom of God in Matthew 20: 17-18, Jesus repudiated them. He told them that in the realm of God disciples do not lord over others, but act as servants. In this way Jesus rejected the use of religion to sanctify dominant hierarchies as well as the use of prophetic language to justify seeking revenge.¹¹ Sometimes the way Jesus is depicted distances people from his authentic teaching and spirit.

Author Tom Harpur has written one of fourteen essays in a book called *The Emerging Christian Way Thoughts, Stories and Wisdom for a Faith of Transformation*, with Michael Schwartzentruber as editor. His chapter is entitled "New Creeds." He notes that many people continue to recite the Apostle's Creed or the Nicene creed in church, but they do so knowing they are giving verbal assent to statements that no longer have coherence or credibility. The creeds are built, Harpur writes, on ancient, untenable beliefs about a three tiered universe from 1900 years ago. They also say nothing about Jesus' key teachings about the realm of God, the way of love or the importance of forgiveness. Harpur feels that these ancient creeds should be retired, making room for new, more authentic ones to emerge.¹² Rosemary Radford Ruether writes that we need to find new language within Christianity that cannot be as easily co-opted by the system of domination.¹³

¹¹ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 29.

¹² Tom Harpur, "New Creeds," in *The Emerging Christian Way: Thoughts, Stories, and Wisdom for a Faith of Transformation*, ed. Michael Schwartzentruber, (Kelowna, BC: Copper House, 2006), 62-63.

¹³ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 66.

Episcopalian priest and author, Cynthia Bourgeault writes about language for Jesus that is old, but contains potential for new insights and fresh ways of seeing. Jesus lays out a path that leads to wholeness and transformation of the mind for human beings, Bourgeault says. Right from the start people did not grasp how different Jesus' path really was. To understand the power of the way of Jesus one must know what the center is. The apostle Paul offers the Greek word *kenosis as the center*, which means "to let go" or "to empty oneself." Jesus always responded in life with the same motion of descent: going lower, taking the lower place, not the higher.¹⁴

Bourgeault writes that along with the newness of this kenotic path to union with God came confusion. Even Jesus' disciples could not quite stay with it because it was a concept so ahead of its time. They would catch it and then lose it again.¹⁵ That misunderstanding seems to be found in images of Jesus dressed in royal garb and associated with kingly power. Raimon Panikkar describes Jesus differently when he says, "I am one with the source insofar as I act as a source by making everything I have received flow again-just like Jesus."¹⁶

Marcus Borg explains that Jesus used the term "kingdom of God" as both a religious and a political term because those two realms were not separable in the Jewish world of Jesus. Rome referred to itself not as an empire, but as a kingdom. People would have made that connection in their minds when they

¹⁴ Bourgeault, *Wisdom Jesus*, 70.

¹⁵ Bourgeault, *Wisdom Jesus*, 70

¹⁶ Raimon Panikkar, *Christophany: The Fulness of Man* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004), 173.

heard the phrase. The term would have had an edge to it. Borg says that as a political and religious metaphor, the kingdom of God referred to what life on earth would be like if God ruled the world and the domination systems did not. The kingdom of God was always for the earth and not about heaven. It imagines a transformed earth brought about by God where everyone has enough and there is no more injustice or violence.¹⁷

Borg writes that Jesus expected people to participate in the bringing of the kingdom of God. He invited people to follow him and to be a part of his passion, which was God's passion too. Jesus sent his disciples to go out and do what he was doing (Luke 10:4-9, Matt. 10: 8-11, Mark 6: 7-13.) The disciples were to heal, share meals, cast out demons and proclaim the kingdom. It was always God's kingdom that Jesus pointed to.¹⁸ In Mark 10: 18 Jesus says "Why do you call me good? Only God alone is good." Marcus Borg points out that in the earliest layers of Jesus' teaching he said nothing about being the messiah or the only son of God. His teaching pointed away from himself toward God. His authentic pre-Easter teaching was centered on God, not on a messianic proclamation about himself.¹⁹ Borg goes on to say that Jesus was not just one who believed strongly in God. He knew God. This does not mean that Jesus was God or that he is the exclusive revelation of God. Borg indicates that Jesus

¹⁷ Marcus Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 2006), 260.

¹⁸ Borg, *Jesus*, 260.

¹⁹ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperSan Francisco, 1994), 29.

is one of many mediators of the sacred. This insight frees Christians from insisting that Christianity is exclusively true or that Jesus is “the only way.”

²⁰ Jesus was one who knew God in a direct and intimate way. He spoke out of that knowledge. This can be an inspiration for others who would also like to be in touch with the same spirit that Jesus knew. It leads beyond believing in God to being in a relationship with God.²¹ These insights are reminiscent of the followers of the bishop Arius, whose way of being Christian was squashed. It is compelling to imagine how things might have been different over the centuries if Arius had prevailed.

Rosemary Radford Ruether adds to these thoughts when she writes, “Christ, as a redemptive person and Word of God, is not to be encapsulated as ‘once and for all’ in the historical Jesus. The Christian community continues Christ’s identity.” She recalls an early Christian prophetism that claims we can encounter Christ in the form of our sister. There are yet uncompleted aspects of human liberation. The spirit of Christ is not confined to a static perfection of one person two thousand years ago.²² This seems to be in keeping with Jesus, who breathed the power of the Spirit upon his disciples and told them they would do even greater things than he had (John 14:12). Jesus had wanted his followers to feel empowered, not as sinful, childlike people waiting for a divine rescuer.

²⁰ Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 37.

²¹ Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 38-39.

²² Ruether, *Sexism and God Talk*, 138.

John Shelby Spong points out that the most common phrase heard about Jesus in worship services is, "He died for my sins." There is a predominant system of thought within churches about human beings being wretched and evil, begging for mercy. Spong asks if that line of thinking ever makes us more whole or more loving. It makes guilt an essential ingredient in the Christian life and envisions God as removed from us. Spong says that the traditional way in which the Christ story is told makes an ogre out of God and angry dependent people out of us. This mentality, says Spong, will never provide people with the power they need to be the persons we were meant to be. It will never lead to abundant life, which Jesus said was his desire for us.²³

John Shelby Spong sees Jesus as a boundary-breaker who tears down walls of prejudice and fear. For Spong, to walk the Christ path is to be empowered to walk beyond all religious systems that bind our humanity. We are meant to become a new humanity, seeking God through giving ourselves away. This touches upon the path of *kenosis* that Cynthia Bourgeault wrote about. We can see the divine within the fulness of Jesus' humanity. This points beyond doctrine to a new way of living that looks for the divine within the deepening dimension of what it means to be human.²⁴

Walter Wink has written compellingly about the human Jesus. He points out that the phrase that Jesus consistently used for himself, translated from Jesus' language of Aramaic was, the "son of the human one." Another way of

²³ Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, 235-36.

²⁴ Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, 286.

saying this is “the human being.” Wink says, “We seek a Jesus who is not the omnipotent God in a man-suit, but someone like us, who looked for God in the center of his life and called the world to join him.”²⁵

Wink uses a critique of the Domination System as his lens for viewing Jesus and his teaching because Jesus also critiqued all forms of domination. This lens is important because Jesus’ teachings have been domesticated over time by the church. Wink summarizes many oppressive systems that Jesus condemned:

- patriarchy and the oppression of women and children;
- the economic exploitation and the impoverishment of entire classes of people;
- the family as chief instrument for the socialization of children with oppressive roles and values;
- hierarchal power arrangements that disadvantage the weak while benefiting the strong;
- the subversion of the law by the defenders of privilege;
- rules of purity that keep people separated;
- racial superiority and ethnocentrism;
- the entire sacrificial system with its belief in sacral violence.²⁶

As others have also noted, Wink says that Jesus does not exhaust the possibilities of incarnating God. Jesus is not the sole incarnation of God and he is not the perfect one either. As a male he does not provide a picture of what

²⁵ Walter Wink, *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002), 11.

²⁶ Wink, *Human Being*, 14.

incarnation might look like for a woman. He does not encompass everything for a man either. As far as we know he did not marry, rear children, live a long life, experience a debilitating illness or many other things associated with being human. Jesus is a human being who incarnated God and taught us how to do the same, through the Holy Spirit working within us. We are not asked to be perfect, or geniuses like Jesus. We are asked to become fully ourselves, aided and inspired by the brilliance of Jesus' life and by what he revealed and taught.²⁷

United Church of Christ pastor and author, Robin R. Meyers says that the dominant heresy in the church today is Docetism, the idea that Jesus was God masquerading as man. When Jesus ceases to be human and becomes only Christ, Meyers writes, we can choose to believe or not believe but we cannot follow. We can admire Jesus, but we cannot emulate him. People sometimes think that the best way to honor Jesus is to deify him and that speaking of him as "just a man" lessens his power. If a supernatural being performed miracles that is to be expected. For a human person to have miraculous effect on his followers is truly inspiring.²⁸ We might try to be like Jesus ourselves through the power of the same divine spirit working through and with us. South African scholar, Albert Nolan said, "Jesus is a much underrated man. To deprive him of his humanity is to deprive him of his greatness."²⁹

²⁷ Wink *Human Being*, 201.

²⁸ Robin R. Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshiping Christ and Start Following Jesus* (New York: HarperOne, 2009), 71-72.

²⁹ Albert Nolan, *Jesus Before Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1978), 117.

Diarmuid O'Murchu, social psychologist and author, also stresses that Jesus' followers are not meant to wait passively for a divine savior to rescue them from sin. They are meant to empower each other in a collaborative endeavor empowered by a nonviolent God.³⁰ Rather than encouraging his disciples to worship him, Jesus spoke passionately and often about the kingdom of God. One of the most vivid parables about the coming of the kingdom on earth involves subversive elements that features a woman adding leaven to flour to make bread. Women in the patriarchal culture of Jesus' day were disempowered and marginalized, yet here the woman is working to help make the kingdom of God manifest. She hides the yeast in the bread which connotes a mysterious edge to the story. Leaven was also considered to be an impure element in Jesus' Jewish culture.³¹

The woman in the parable also uses an extravagant amount of flour. Three measures of flour amounts to more than thirty pounds. Original listeners to the parable would have heard that there was to be a very abundant yield in due time and that shockingly, the catalyst for this breakthrough was a woman. Noticing these subversive and inclusive elements in the gospel could lead to a new understanding in our time of the acceptability and creativity of women as disciples of Jesus.³²

³⁰ Diarmuid O' Murchu, *Christianity's Dangerous Memory: A Rediscovery of the Revolutionary Jesus* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2011), 20.

³¹ O'Murchu, *Christianity's Dangerous Memory*, 66.

³² O'Murchu, *Christianity's Dangerous Memory*, 67-68.

O'Murchu writes that churches seem to have lost their vitality and reason for being. He believes that is because they have become disconnected to their authentic source. That is not the imperial Christ, but the fiery, prophetic vision of the kingdom of God, a dangerous and liberating movement, with a power for truth that endures across time and culture.³³ Reconnecting to the authentic source, empowering one another through the spirit of Christ and being open to new symbols and language could be a meaningful spiritual path for the twenty-first century, with Jesus at the lead.

³³ O'Murchu, *Christianity's Dangerous Memory*, 189.

Chapter 3

Process Theologians Perspective

Jay McDaniel, director of the Steel Center for the Study of Religion and Philosophy at Hendrix College, Arkansas, explains that for process thinkers one important way of finding wisdom in life is by learning from past traditions in which one is situated. In process thought these historical traditions are not only cultural treasures. They become islands of possibility. They contain within them seeds of possibility for the future, if critically appropriated and creatively transformed. Sometimes helpful ways into the future may be found in the past.¹ Such an outlook lends itself to reevaluating Christianity and the way it has been presented and widely understood over time. In process thought there is great value in being open to creative transformation.

Process theologians, John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin assert that creative transformation is growth, and growth is the essence of life. Where there is effective creative transformation, Christ is present. It is the love of God that initiates creative transformation in creatures and it is involved in all human love. Christ is not limited to the church or to the religious. When people believe that everything is settled by what happened in the past the effectiveness of Christ is reduced. Christ is most present to those who are open to creative

¹ Jay McDaniel, *What is Process Thought?: Seven Answers to Seven Questions* (Claremont, CA: P and F Press, 2008), 25.

transformation.² These authors state that Jesus himself was open to creative transformation and to conform to Jesus is to share in that openness.³ Process thought might help us to see that Jesus himself was open to change. He is not the defender of an unchanging status quo.

Some process theologians feel that responsible participation in the Christian tradition involves demonstrating meaningful continuity with the past, and building upon inherited resources that bring forth wisdom and compassion. An important part of this is also acknowledging Christianity's failings of the past: patriarchy, neglect of the earth and animals, arrogance toward other faith traditions, imperialism, insensitivity to diverse sexual orientations and tendencies toward violence. Repentance does not need to involve a sense of guilt but, it does require turning around from the sins of the past and moving constructively into the future. Christians can repent both as individuals and as a community.⁴

Another approach involves imagining what Christianity can and should be. This need not necessitate a look to the past or even the present state of Christianity. The guiding aim of the faith should be being faithful to God as revealed in Christ. Being faithful means trusting God. This trust involves a healthy sense of mystery, knowing that God is always more than our concepts of the divine. Realizing this can allow God to flow within our lives. As we share the journey of Christ and attempt to extend it we must try to be open to God in our

² John B. Cobb, Jr. and David Ray Griffin, *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976), 100-01.

³ Cobb and Griffin, *Process Theology*, 103.

⁴ McDaniel, *What is Process Thought?*, 99.

own time and our own way, as Jesus was in his time and his way. This way of living involves being willing to be creatively transformed, again and again, by the beauty of nature, the changing circumstances of life, and the ever adaptive callings of God. For process theologians this is what it means to follow Christ.⁵

Diarmuid O'Murchu writes that Jesus' story is not closed, but remains radically open to the ongoing engagement and creativity of each new Christian generation.⁶ Jesus himself used storytelling in his teaching ministry. They were not the type of story where a teacher deposits information into the empty receptacle of the listener. His parables and narratives encouraged creative engagement from the audience and worlds of alternate possibilities were opened up. Process theology speaks of God offering a gentle lure to us. Jesus felt at home in the world of stories and his narratives invited people to imagine open horizons that lure us on. Storytelling dwells in the world of creation, evolution, imagination, and process. Jesus' stories do not have clear points of endings, but leave possibilities wide open.⁷ Noticing that can free us from rigid interpretations about the meaning of Jesus' life and teaching. We can try to discover what following Jesus today means for us and how it can add meaning to our lives.

Process theologian, Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki talks about the possibilities that God offers to us in every moment. There is always freedom on

⁵ McDaniel, *What is Process Thought?*, 100-01.

⁶ Diarmuid O'Murchu, *Catching Up With Jesus: A Gospel Story for Our Times* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2005), 12.

⁷ O'Murchu, *Catching Up With Jesus*, 12-13.

our part to participate on some level toward what we might become. Three powers of creation are associated with our freedom. There is power from the past. We must take into account past influences in our life. They have an effect in every moment. We also take the creative power of God into ourselves at each moment. God's creativity is the power of transformation, of hope and of a new future. The third power is ourselves. We decide what we will become and it is our choice how we will use these three powers.⁸ Within the world view of process theology, God works not *on* the world but *with* the world.⁹ Reevaluating interpretations about Christianity that are not liberating for many people is a good thing that can help to remove barriers to our spiritual growth. God and Jesus will be with us in this endeavor guiding us to greater compassion and wholeness for ourselves and others.

Process theologian and author, Bruce Epperly acknowledges that for many people the church should be the one place where things stay the same, even as the world around it is in the throes of constant social and scientific change. Yet, an unchanging faith, closed off to insights from an evolving world, eventually renders ancient traditions irrelevant to the ethical and spiritual questions of people in the twenty-first century. Faithfulness to God involves openness to God's ongoing process of creative transformation. The very presence of Jesus is a change agent in itself. The church must be willing

⁸ Marjorie Suchocki, *What is Process Theology? A Conversation with Marjorie*, <http://www.processandfaith.org>, 2003 (accessed March 19, 2014).

⁹ Suchocki, *What is Process Theology*

transform itself and to have a role in transforming the world. Being open to change reflects the divine and human call and response which allows humanity to embody God's vision.¹⁰

Epperly writes that process theology's affirmation of Christ as the source of creative transformation may at times lead to challenging religious doctrines and practices that stifle the spirit. The spirit may be suppressed by denying God's ongoing revelation, the demand for strict and unquestioning obedience, or by identifying faith with violent or destructive personal or communal behavior. Openness to God's universal and continuing presence does not mean unquestioning adherence to harmful doctrine or behavior. It does not mean uncritical acceptance of positions that we differ with theologically or ethically.¹¹ This spirit of openness to God's ongoing vision can be seen in Jesus when he referred to the prophets of old saying, "You have heard it said ..., but I say to you ..." (Mathew 5:27, NRSV).

Process theologians recognize the relativity of their own viewpoint, but they still identify spiritual health with openness, diversity, valuing of experience and the promotion of beauty and justice for all people and the planet. This sometimes necessitates that theologies that promote hatred, polarization, sexism, heterosexism, and violence must be challenged. These challenges, done in the light of God's ongoing vision for beauty and shalom, must be

¹⁰ Bruce G. Epperly, *Process Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed* (London: T and T Clark, 2011), 120-21.

¹¹ Epperly, *Process Theology*, 125.

initiated in the interest of healing and reconciliation amid diverse theological and ethical viewpoints.¹² Bruce Epperly reminds us that commitment to the way of Jesus constantly challenges us to create and recreate our faith stories, since our lives and experiences evolve in light of new experiences of God, the world, and the communities where we are located. Our personal faith changes as we grow. This was true for the earliest Christians who moved beyond Judaism and its rituals and rules. They were transformed by their encounter with Jesus and also by encounters with Greek philosophy, and the Greek language of the new testament.¹³

Process theologian, Catherine Keller writes that from the earliest stages of recording the story of Jesus, the symbolic Christ has overshadowed the historical human being. She tells her own parable to get her point across. "A man died. The people who knew him gathered to share memories. Finally a portrait was commissioned. But as generations passed the painting did not seem fine enough. The heirs of the portrait, who had become wealthy, created a new golden frame, immense, carved with motifs from the portrait and encrusted with jewels. People began to feel that the old portrait of that dark fellow with the haunting eyes pulled the effect down. As it began to peel from age, they extended the frame inward. One day the frame covered the whole canvas." ¹⁴

¹² Epperly, *Process Theology*, 125.

¹³ Bruce G. Epperly, *Emerging Process: Adventurous Theology for a Missional Church* (Cleveland, TN: Parson's Porch Books, 2011), 58-59.

¹⁴ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 133.

Keller sees a “processed” Christ who is distinct from the Jesus of the gospels. The processed Christ is encapsulated in the creeds, which mention nothing about Jesus’ passion for the kingdom of God. Jesus’ radically relational metaphor of the kingdom of God does not propose anything resembling any historical kingship, empire, patrilineage dictatorship or top-down power. John Cobb argues that the best English translation for the word kingdom may be commonwealth. Commonwealth does not suggest the controlling power of a ruler and it suggests an understanding that it is organized for the common good. The commonwealth of God resists every human superpower. Jesus saw the work and purpose of his community to begin to actualize the commonwealth of God here and now.¹⁵

It is not that Keller does not appreciate the inexhaustible radiance of the Christ symbol. She would like to see that symbol come into alignment with the priorities of the Gospel Jesus. She hopes that the frame would crack open and what would come into focus would be the way of the kingdom of God that Jesus had as his priority.¹⁶ The Christ symbol is alive, says Keller, only to the extent that it is embodied in process. It is in process to the extent that any church is alive. A church is alive to the extent that it is living out the justice seeking, loving vision of the kingdom of God.¹⁷

¹⁵ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 135.

¹⁶ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 136-37.

¹⁷ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 154.

Diarmuid O'Murchu says that Jesus, who made all things new, flew in the face of all the royal, kingly standards as he reappropriated their language and imagery. There would be no ruling class anymore, no select favorites for royal treatment and no preferential treatment for those who came at the first hour. It is a realm of equality and mutual empowerment. The kingdom of God is a strategy for practical change, not just pious platitudes. It is a vision for radical transformation. Helping to realize this future of hope and equality is what it means to be a disciple of Jesus.¹⁸

Pastor and author, Paul R. Smith, writes that the Jesus of the postmodern church is a liberator. The prophets are valued and Jesus' parables are seen as tools for subverting the oppressive social and political structures of the day. He explains that Jesus and Christ may be seen as two different descriptors. Jesus refers to the historical person who taught and lived in first century Galilee. Jesus revealed an awareness of God that could be called "Christ consciousness." The word Christ indicates an anointing by the spirit that not only Jesus had. It is available to and already present in everyone. Of course, the spirit manifested through Jesus in extraordinary ways.¹⁹ Still, Jesus provides a role model for us to emulate and a way to try to experience the same spirit that he was in tune with. Jesus guides us on a path to become more fully human, or more humane.

Smith writes that in the twenty-first century it is important that we take Jesus off the ethnocentric pedestal of being the world's only savior. We must

¹⁸ O'Murchu, *Catching Up With Jesus*, 56-57.

¹⁹ Paul R. Smith, *Integral Christianity*, (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2011), 67.

remove from him the responsibility of having saved us from hell by dying for our sins. Smith says that when we worship Jesus we are technically worshipping the God incarnate in him. That is good, but what is even more important is to become like him. It is important to grasp this new understanding so that we can be released to become who we really are, daughters and sons of God, created in God's image. Smith reminds us that Jesus is not the only person who has revealed God in extraordinary ways, as other faith traditions testify. His passion was to teach us about realizing our full potential as human beings and to embrace the power that we have through the Spirit of God. Jesus encourages us to see that he is the light of the world and that he did mean it when he said that we are meant to be the light of the world too.²⁰

²⁰ Smith, *Integral Christianity The Spirit's Call to Evolve*, 249.

Chapter 4

Religious Education and Spiritual Formation

If the spiritual path that Jesus offers has been obscured by some interpretations that are dominant then education is an important factor for reflection and possible reevaluation. Feminists generally agree that whoever names the world owns the world. Christianity has been interpreted and presented through a patriarchal lens for most of its existence. Religious education can be a key to breaking open the liberating, mutually empowering vision of the kingdom of God that Jesus was so passionate about.

Judy Helfand, a Humanities professor of a community college, has done anti-racism work in her community. Her chapter, "Teaching Outside Whiteness" in the book *Diversity and Multiculturalism A Reader*, edited by Shirley R. Steinberg has many concepts that could be applied broadly. She has spoken of making whiteness visible so that the norms, ideologies, and values associated with this privileged group may begin to be transformed as to include other ways of thinking, other values and behaviors. This is useful to any multicultural setting and could also be applied to the often unseen structures of patriarchy.¹

Helfand is interested in unseen roots within the educational system that train students to fit into and unconsciously support an inequitable system of white supremacy. She notices and asks whose voices are encouraged and

¹ Judy Helfand, "Teaching Outside Whiteness," in *Diversity and Multiculturalism: A Reader*, ed. Shirley R. Steinberg (New York: Peter Lang, 2009), 77.

whose are silenced. She suggests some techniques for encouraging students to begin to question long held beliefs. One simple thing is to have the classroom arranged in a circle, rather than straight rows. The circle implies that everyone, including the teacher can learn from one another. It is not an authoritarian set up where all of the focus is on the teacher. All voices are seen to matter. Sitting in a circle feels like everyone is part of a group and a circle encourages acknowledgement of subjectivity. Barriers to conversation are removed and it is easier to express emotion and spirit as a part of conversation.²

Helfand encourages her students to consider who is doing the talking when they listen to television or radio or read literature or history. She notes that history is usually told from the perspective of a dominant white point of view. We are often given a sort of glamour shot or airbrushed view of American history, leaving out social resistance, the contributions of people of color, the impact of race on the immigrant experience, and much more. In order to reinforce the value of multiple voices and perspectives and to encourage the inclusion of emotion along with intellect Helfand uses storytelling in her classroom. Storytelling takes the focus off the teacher as the source for all the information in the classroom. It allows students to take responsibility for constructing knowledge from the rich stories of other students along with readings.³

² Steinberg, *Diversity and Multiculturalism*, 78-79.

³ Steinberg, *Diversity and Multiculturalism*, 82.

In considering a church setting Helfand's insights are valuable. Characters from Biblical literature who have been marginalized or silenced could be fleshed out through storytelling. The contributions of women disciples might be noticed and celebrated. This is a valuable gift for young girls and for women. Education in church could help them to see that they are a part of the Christian story in important ways, even if that has not been a traditional emphasis. Sometimes young girls are taught, both subliminally and overtly that they are not quite in God's image the way males are. Characters that are not named in the Bible because they are of such low status could be highlighted and discussed to see what they have to teach us. Helfand talks about making the privilege of whiteness seen. The same could be done regarding patriarchy as questions about who is doing the talking are asked.

Educator, Ozlem Sensoy points out that sometimes it is thought that being in the majority is the main criterion for privilege, but women are the majority in the world as are poor and working people. Blacks were the majority under apartheid in South Africa. The key criterion is social power.⁴ Scholarship about oppression makes it clear that the primary way that privilege operates is through the perception of its normalcy. Making things visible can be an act of resistance to structures that confer dominance over some members of the

⁴ Steinberg, *Diversity and Multiculturalism*, 325.

community. Another act of resistance is for allies with unearned privilege, such as men, whites, heterosexuals and the able-bodied, to take action.⁵

Timothy J. Stanley writes vividly about the ways in which some people's culture and history is virtually erased by those in power in "The Banality of Colonialism Encountering Artifacts of Genocide and White Supremacy in Vancouver Today" in *Diversity and Multiculturalism A Reader*, edited by Shirley R. Steinberg. He talks about the selective remembering and deliberately engineered forgetting of colonialism.⁶ The languages of the indigenous people of Canada were forcibly wiped out and replaced with English by the colonizers. Indigenous languages were simply steamrolled over and this was reenforced through government policy. Eventually those who speak English seem normal while other languages appear foreign.⁷

Something similar happens with the system of patriarchy within Christianity. Eventually it seems normal for all language to be masculine. Women are obscured by words such as "mankind." People stop noticing that women's stories are rarely included in sermons or homilies. Many women and men take these patriarchal ways of envisioning the world for granted. They no longer see it. God is predominantly spoken of as "He" with the most foremost image being "God the Father." Making these things visible, gathering in circles to reflect, reevaluate and reconsider symbols and language can be an empowering

⁵ Steinberg, *Diversity and Multiculturalism*, 328-29.

⁶ Steinberg, *Diversity and Multiculturalism*, 144.

⁷ Steinberg, *Diversity and Multiculturalism*, 146-47.

and liberating educational process for both women and men. To truly reflect the realm of God that Jesus calls disciples to manifest all people must be included in language, symbols, and community.

Paulo Freire, one of the most significant educational thinkers of the twentieth century, explains that eventually people who have been oppressed internalize the image of the oppressor. They adopt the guidelines set out for them by the oppressor and are fearful of freedom. In order to overcome the circumstances of oppression, people must first recognize its causes. The oppressor, who is also dehumanized by the act of degrading others is not able to lead the struggle for transformation. The struggle for freedom and transformation must emerge from the stifled humanity of the oppressed. This is not an easy movement because people become adapted to to the structure of domination and they doubt their capacity to change things. Their struggle for freedom threatens not only the oppressor, but also oppressed comrades who are fearful of change.⁸

The internalization of the oppressor's consciousness is a tragic circumstance that educators must take into account. A pedagogy to help oppressed people regain their full humanity must be forged *with*, and not *for*, the oppressed. Reflection is an important part of this process because only as people discover themselves as hosts of the oppressor can they contribute to the bringing forth of their liberation. The oppressed must make the discovery that

⁸ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, (New York: Continuum, 1970), 47.

they are being dehumanized. Liberation is thus like childbirth. It is painful and as a result one emerges as a new person who is neither oppressor or oppressed, but human in the process of achieving freedom.⁹ Within many Christian churches people have internalized the worldview of patriarchy, with the elevation of linear and logical thinking and the denigration of emotion and intuition. Many people take for granted a hierarchal set up with top down authority, rather than a mutually empowering, inclusive arrangement.

Freire wrote about the “banking” concept of education where the teacher’s task is to fill the students with the contents of their narration. The content of the narration is often disconnected from the lives and concerns of the students. Students in this schema are seen as empty receptacles to be filled by the teacher. The more completely the students accept the passive role imposed on them the more they tend to simply adapt to the world as it is and to the disjointed view of reality deposited in them. The oppressor’s peace of mind is affected by how well people fit into their world view and by how little they question it.¹⁰

Freire sees a better way to teach which he calls problem posing education. Through dialogue both teacher and student learn together. They become jointly responsible for the process in which all will grow. In this process arguments based upon “authority” are no longer valid. This is education as the practice of freedom, rather than education as the practice of domination.

⁹ Freire, *Pedagogy*, 48-49.

¹⁰ Freire, *Pedagogy*, 72-73.

¹¹Problem posing education affirms men and women as people in a process of becoming. They are unfinished, uncompleted beings with a similarly unfinished reality. This hopeful stance towards the future is prophetic. This system of thought sees men and women as beings who transcend themselves. They move forward and look ahead. When they do look back it is only for the purpose of understanding who they are so that they can build the future more wisely. With problem posing education people must understand their state not as fated and unalterable, but merely limiting and therefore challenging.¹²

Bell Hooks, Distinguished Professor of English at City College in New York has experienced different types of education during her time as a student. When she was very young the teachers in her school were excited about teaching. They encouraged dialogue, exchange of thoughts and the joy of being changed by ideas. While they did not say so explicitly to the students the teachers knew that education was an act of resistance to colonialism. All of this changed drastically with racial integration. After being bused to a white school, Hooks learned that what was valued there was obedience rather than a zeal to learn. It was a disappointing shift from a school where learning was pure joy to the boredom of the banking system of education that Freire wrote about.¹³

Bell Hooks writes about her concern about a dying and corrupt academy. She says that biases that uphold sexism, racism, white supremacy

¹¹ Freire, *Pedagogy*, 80-81.

¹² Freire, *Pedagogy*, 84-85.

¹³ Bell Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 2-3.

and imperialism distort education so that it no longer brings freedom.¹⁴ Her concerns about the dying academy can be applied to churches as well. Many mainline churches are declining in membership and face the prospect of dying too. Education in churches as a way to uncover Jesus' spiritual path of mutual empowerment could be a source of revitalization of churches. As Freire said, people can become men and women who transcend themselves. That cannot happen through blind obedience to orthodoxy and external authority. Congregants and clergy will need a safe space to reflect, to ask questions and to recreate church for the twenty-first century. As Freire said, they can look back but only to consider moving wisely into the future.

Sociologists, Dale Kratt and Carol A. Jenkins write that theology and religious education need to be rooted in and connected to peoples real lives. As the United States continues to become more multicultural, multiracial, multilingual and multi-religious this is a complex challenge. Religious education will benefit from the insights of sociology as we continue to grow into a more diverse culture.¹⁵ Before religious education can build bridges between cultural groups, the environment in which education takes place must be understood. What are the structures and patterns by which people interact on a daily basis? Although diversity can sometimes be a threat to unity, it also has the potential to

¹⁴ Hooks, *Teaching to Transgress*, 29.

¹⁵ Carol A. Jenkins and Dale Kratt, "Sociological Foundations of Multicultural Religious Education," in *Multicultural Religious Education*, ed. Barbara Wilkerson (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1997), 63.

create greater harmony. The inclusion of different voices and perspectives may be seen as a strength. It will add variety and life.¹⁶

Deborah L. Bainer and Jeffrey W. Peck remind us that people's styles of learning are as distinctive as fingerprints. Some people prefer to work alone, others collaboratively, some learn best visually, others aurally. Some people learn kinetically or through physical manipulation. Learning style is influenced by the individual's neural organization, culture, personality, school and community.¹⁷ Religious educators need to interact with and encourage learners in a variety of ways. Teaching methods such as lectures, questioning, group discussion and reflection should be balanced with music, artwork, roleplaying and storytelling. There is strong evidence that learning is more successful when it is made relevant to daily life, and learners can participate in learning situations.¹⁸

Susan Burt, Coordinating Editor of "Seasons of the Spirit", a Christian education and worship resource, says that new settings and enthusiasm are emerging within Christianity. More and more we embrace and search for meaning rather than certainty. The banking system of education that is always telling and seldom listening is giving way to a stance of listening for the word in others. We are waking up to the use of metaphor, poetry and imagery by those

¹⁶ Jenkins and Kratt, 87.

¹⁷ Deborah L. Bainer and Jeffrey W. Peck, "Effective Teaching and Multicultural Religious Education," in *Multicultural Religious Education*, ed. Barbara Wilkerson (Birmingham, AL: Religious Education Press, 1997), 295.

¹⁸ Brainer and Peck, ed., Wilkerson, *Multicultural Religious Education*, 299.

who wrote the Bible as we move away from a literal and factual interpretation of scripture.¹⁹ Burt upholds the importance of imagination in Christian education. The ability to think the new is an act of survival. The saving work of theology requires new imaginative visions. Burt finds the metaphor of the midwife, conspiring and collaborating to bring forth new life, a helpful image of what we do together in Christian education. We can collaborate together to equip, empower, and enable each other to bring Biblical stories to new life. Together we can search for meaning in our time and place, creating a shared vision to help transform the world.²⁰

¹⁹ Susan Burt, "Christian Education and the Imaginative Spirit," in *The Emerging Christian Way: Thoughts, Stories, and Wisdom for a Faith of Transformation*, ed. Michael Schwartzentruber (Kelowna, BC: CopperHouse, 2006) 201.

²⁰ Burt, "Christian Education and the Imaginative Spirit," in *The Emerging Christian Way: Thoughts, Stories, and Wisdom for a Faith of Transformation*, ed. Michael Schwartzentruber (Kelowna, BC: CopperHouse, 2006), 212.

Chapter 5

Description of the Project

Three adult education classes were offered at First Congregational United Church of Christ in San Bernardino, CA over three consecutive weekends in September of 2013. The classes were designed to stimulate thought about different ways of understanding Jesus, his life and his ministry and how Jesus offers a meaningful spiritual path for the twenty-first century. The first class was offered on September 15. To get conversation and thinking started several diverse images of Jesus were displayed. The question was asked, "Which of these images are you drawn to and why?" People were interested in the question and it got things off to a lively start with comments and discussion. The images can be seen in Appendix A of this paper. They were present for all three classes.

Each class began with a short lecture in which ideas of various authors, scholars and theologians were shared. I stressed to those in attendance that I was inviting them to consider the thoughts of these people and that there was no pressure to agree with them. I mentioned that there would be discussion questions distributed after the lecture with time for interacting with the material. Following the lecture, people were invited to begin discussion of the questions in small groups of five or six. Approximately 15 minutes was allowed for that, after which we moved to a large group and ideas and thoughts were shared with the group as a whole. People were very engaged in the discussions. They found

the material and questions interesting and they enjoyed thinking about it. The lectures and discussion questions can be seen in the Appendixes for this paper.

Twenty four people attended on September 15. The topic that week was “Jesus as a Wisdom Teacher.” Fifteen of the attendees were male and nine were female. There were four Hispanic attendees, twenty white people, one person in a wheelchair, eighteen were straight and six were gay.

For the second class which was “Jesus as Liberator” on September 22, twenty-three people attended. Twelve were women and eleven were men. Nineteen people were white, four were Hispanic, two were African American, one was in a wheelchair, eighteen were straight and five were gay.

On September 29, the topic was “Jesus the Christ.” Twenty-one people were in attendance, twelve of whom were women and nine who were men. All attendees were white, one was in a wheel chair, nineteen were straight and two were gay.

Several weeks before the classes were offered people were invited to the classes through the church e-news, announcements during the Sunday worship service, at ministry meetings, on Facebook and by word of mouth. Requests that people would fill out a survey designed to measure any transformation that might occur as a result of the classes were also included in these communications. The surveys were available in the church office, were distributed in worship bulletins and given out at the classes. It was explained in all of these modes of communication that there would be a second, identical

survey distributed at the end of the classes in order to measure any change that might occur. The survey may be viewed in Appendix D.

Twenty-six preliminary buff colored surveys were filled out and returned to me. Of these, sixteen were the preliminary survey only. Two had no name, so I could not try to match them with a second one. Twenty-one of the second purple colored surveys were filled out and returned. Eleven of those were the second survey only. One had no name recorded. Ten complete surveys were returned that included the respondent's names and both copies.

Movement of thought occurred with each question. Twenty-eight increments of movement were from a conservative outlook to a more progressive one. Twelve increments of movement were from a progressive stance to a more orthodox answer. Three respondents had chosen Strongly Disagree for all ten answers on both surveys, seeming to indicate that they had a progressive point of view from beginning to end. Those three people showed no movement of thought as a result of the classes, but more open ended questions could have indicated a deepening of convictions or a new idea encountered.

Moving through the questions one at a time shows changes throughout. The choices for response were Strongly Agree, Agree, Neutral, Disagree, Strongly Disagree and Other.

Survey Questions

1. Jesus' purpose in life was to save us from our sins. Three people moved one increment, conservative to progressive, Disagree to Strongly Disagree, Agree to Neutral and Neutral to Disagree. One person moved two increments, conservative to progressive, Agree to Disagree.
2. Obedience is an important response to God because God offers one right path for each of us. One person moved two increments, progressive to conservative, Disagree to Agree. One moved one increment, progressive to conservative, Disagree to Neutral. Two People moved one increment, conservative to progressive, Disagree to Strongly Disagree.
3. Jesus is the only son of God. Three people moved one increment, conservative to progressive, Disagree to Strongly Disagree, Strongly Agree to Agree and Disagree to Neutral.
4. Jesus chose only twelve male disciples. One person changed two increments, progressive to conservative, Disagree to Agree. One people moved two increments, conservative to more progressive, Strongly Agree to Neutral. One person moved two increments, conservative to progressive, Strongly Agree to Disagree.
5. Christians should be meek and passive. That is what turning the other cheek is all about. One person moved one increment, progressive to conservative, Disagree to Neutral. One person moved two increments, conservative to progressive, Strongly Agree to Neutral. Two people moved one increment,

conservative to progressive, Neutral to Disagree and Disagree to Strongly Disagree.

6. The incarnation of the Christ light occurred only once in history and that was in Jesus. The light of Christ or the Wisdom of the Universe no longer seeks embodiment. Two people moved two increments, progressive to conservative, Disagree to Agree, Strongly Disagree to Neutral. One person moved one increment from progressive to conservative, Strongly Disagree to Disagree. One person moved two increments, conservative to progressive, Neutral to Strongly Disagree.
7. The source of empowerment that Jesus offers is found in his death, rather than his life. One person moved one increment, progressive to conservative, Strongly Disagree to Disagree. One person moved one increment, conservative to progressive, Disagree to Strongly Disagree.
8. Jesus would not want things within the church to change. One person moved one increment, progressive to conservative, Strongly Disagree to Agree. One person moved two increments, conservative to progressive, Neutral to Strongly Disagree.
9. Jesus saw people as weak and sinful. One person moved one increment, progressive to conservative, Strongly Disagree to Disagree. One person moved two increments, conservative to progressive, Neutral to Strongly Disagree. One person moved one increment, conservative to progressive, Disagree to Strongly Disagree.

10. Jesus taught with parables and narratives because he wanted to give people definitive answers. One person moved one increment, conservative to progressive, Disagree to Strongly Disagree. One person moved four increments, conservative to progressive, Strongly Agree to Disagree.

Despite the fact that my survey sample turned out to be tiny the classes generated a lot of conversation, thought and engagement. The attendance numbers were very good for an adult education opportunity at this church and it remained steady for the three weeks. People were very interested in the lecture material and the conversations afterward. The energy in the room during the discussion time was unusually animated. Everyone present enjoyed the experience.

Even though some of the movement indicated by the surveys went in a direction, from progressive to conservative, that I had not anticipated I count the classes a good success. The church offers a safe space for people to think about different kinds of theological thought. That is the type of environment where new and possibly liberating ways of being church together might emerge for the twenty-first century. I could not control the mechanics of how the surveys were returned to me or how the material I presented was received. That is the reality of a congregation of diverse people. Things can be unpredictable and may not go according to plan. Process theologians might say that the congregation is a living, moving community in the midst of becoming. That might involve a measure of chaos, but life breaks forth from there.

The congregation I serve has new people coming all the time. Some have very conservative church backgrounds and some have no church background at all. It is a slow process to move from one worldview to another. Not everyone feels the freedom or the desire to make that sort of movement. Patriarchy is the water we swim in in our culture for the most part. For many people it is not problematic that God is almost exclusively spoken of in masculine terms, or that tenets thought to be orthodox do not make a lot of sense when examined. Many lay people do not have the inclination or confidence to articulate theological views. These may be some of the factors that shed light on the movement from progressive thought to conservative on some surveys.

The classes were a success regardless of a small survey sample or the direction of movement of thought. People discovering permission to ask questions of their received theology is positive in itself. For those who have been controlled or domesticated by certain religious systems and traditions a first step to empowerment is feeling safe to question things. Doing so in a beloved community is an important part of the process as well. If and when a particular Christian doctrine has been outgrown it is helpful to have something meaningful and good with which to rebuild one's faith life. Being able to consider the insights of excellent theologians, scholars and authors is a valuable asset.

Chapter 6

Conclusion and Recommendations

The classes presented in this thesis project are meant to highlight theologians, authors and scholars who uphold human dignity and potential because I think that is what Jesus tried to do. I decided not to use a survey with open ended questions in hope that I would get more completed surveys returned since people often do not enjoy filling such things out. I ran into trouble getting both parts of the survey, before and after the class, returned although it had been mentioned several times. If a church were to lead these classes and wanted a similar survey it might be helpful to stress very strongly the need for both parts to be completed and returned.

Maybe there is a better mechanism for measuring transformation. It might have been helpful at the end of the third class to ask people to stay for ten or fifteen minutes to fill out a short survey that would be collected right then. The survey could ask directly if their thinking had changed on any points and why. Possibly one essay question would be better than the two surveys. They could be collected after the final class giving a better chance to gather feedback. Passing around an attendance sheet would have been a good idea too, giving information about the number of classes each person attended.

People were interested in the material presented in the classes even though it was unorthodox. That might not be the case in a more conservative church. I believe it helped to say that I was presenting ideas of different

theologians and scholars for them to consider. That might have made people feel at ease in that they were not asked to agree with the ideas. The discussions were enhanced by the fact that trust has been built among the people over the years. It also helped to start with small groups and then move to the large group as a whole. That gave more opportunity for everyone to have a chance to voice an opinion or ask a question. It was also fun to hear what the various small groups came up with.

I used handouts at various points which are noted in the paper. These were Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31, Wisdom, Luke 10: 25-37, the parable of the Good Samaritan, and Ezekiel and his vision, Ezekiel 1:26-2:1. Many people are visual learners and seeing the stories in print helped a lot. I wanted them to have the story of the Good Samaritan before them to help them think about how it might be re-imagined today. I was glad that I made several copies because people wanted to hold them. The story of Ezekiel's vision is so dense and full of symbolism it seemed helpful to see it in print. It helps to use a large font for those who need it as well. Having the diverse images of Jesus present through the three classes added a nice visual dimension as well. Someone with good technological ability could do many things with a screen too.

The energy in the class discussions was highest during the first two sessions, "Jesus as a Wisdom Teacher" and "Jesus as Liberator." The third class, "Jesus the Christ" had less animated discussion. Possibly that is because the concept of Christ is esoteric. The idea that Jesus was not the only person to

incarnate the Spirit of God may have seemed the most “out there.” Overall though, people enjoyed hearing new ideas and having the space to talk about them. They appreciated that the material presented was not softened or watered down. It was interesting material for them to delve into. People like to have their openness to learning and their intelligence recognized and respected.

In conclusion, following the way of Jesus is meant to be an empowering spiritual path for all people. As Christianity became formally organized power was seen to be invested in priests and other religious leaders. The breathing of the Holy Spirit by Jesus on to his disciples was reframed into a concept of strictly controlled apostolic succession from bishop to bishop. Jesus’ lively, eclectic community of women and men became an all male hierarchy with an emphasis on correct belief.

Jesus wants us to reach our full human potential by living a life centered in God, like he did. In the Gospel stories wherever Jesus is found, abundance follows. The same can be true for us today. Our Christian legacy should not lead us to see ourselves as weak, sinful, passive people in need of divine rescue. Our walk with God, with Jesus as a role model and brother, should empower us to confront systems of evil in large and small ways. Jesus, being a fully realized human being drew forth other people’s human dignity. He made people feel whole.

The Commonwealth of God is a community of mutuality, compassion and hope. It acknowledges that no one can be saved unless all are saved. God’s

realm is more a circle than a pyramid and no one is excluded because of gender, sexual orientation, disability or race. The vision for the realm of God with justice, inclusion and equality got somewhat distorted over the years, but it still shimmers as a holy possibility. New language, symbols and ways of being church together are needed for the twenty-first century. The same spirit that was with Jesus will show us the path into the future.

Appendix A



Images Used for Discussion

Week One-Jesus as Wisdom Teacher

There was an early connection between Jesus and the figure of Wisdom found in the Book of Proverbs in the Hebrew bible. She is called Hockmah in the

Jewish tradition, and Sophia in the Greek of the New Testament. This original, early connection has been somewhat lost over the centuries.¹

Proverbs 8: 1-4, 22-31 (NRSV) (Handout)

Does not wisdom call,
and does not understanding raise her voice?

On the heights, beside the way,
at the crossroads she takes her stand;
beside the gates in front of the town,
at the entrance of the portals she cries out:

"To you, O people, I call,
and my cry is to all that live.

The Lord created me at the beginning of his work,
the first of his acts of long ago.

Ages ago I was set up,
at the first, before the beginning of the earth.

When there were no depths I was brought forth,
when there were no springs abounding with water.

Before the mountains had been shaped,
before the hills, I was brought forth—
when he had not yet made earth and fields,
or the world's first bits of soil.

¹ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: Harper Collins Publishers, 1994), 98.

When he established the heavens, I was there,
when he drew a circle on the face of the deep,
when he made firm the skies above,
when he established the fountains of the deep,
when he assigned to the sea its limit,
so that the waters might not transgress his command,
when he marked out the foundations of the earth, then I was beside him, like a
master worker;
and I was daily his delight,
rejoicing before him always,
rejoicing in his inhabited world
and delighting in the human race.

John 1:1- In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.

Wisdom is a central category for apostle Paul. He refers to Jesus as the "Sophia of God" as in First Corinthians 1: 23-24. The word philosophy has the word Sophia in it and it means "love of wisdom." What Judaism said of Wisdom, the New Testament came to say of Jesus. Both were called "the image of the

invisible God” “the firstborn of all creation” and “the one through whom God created the world.”²

In Matthew 11:19 (NRSV) Jesus identifies with Wisdom. “The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, ‘Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!’ Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds.”

The earliest Christians saw Jesus not so much as a savior as a wisdom teacher, offering a path through which they too could become enlightened. A wisdom Christianity focuses on the path that leads to enlightenment. The first name for Christianity was “The Way.” Focus on a path or a way for spiritual growth is an indicator of a wisdom tradition.³

Other indicators include the use of aphorisms, or short pithy, thought provoking phrases such as “Let the dead bury the dead.” Taken literally it doesn’t make sense, but when you think about it awhile you might conclude that Jesus was referring to the unenlightened or the spiritually dead. Alive, yet dead in some sense. Another aphorism Jesus used is “Can a blind person lead a blind person? Will they not both fall into a pit?” Taken literally the statement could be true. At a metaphorical or spiritual level it has a deeper meaning that invites thought and reflection. The short memorable aphorisms that Jesus used are invitational forms of speech that invite people to see something they might not

² Cynthia Avens and Richard Zelly, *Walking the Path of ChristoSophia: Exploring the Hidden Tradition in Christian Spirituality* (Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2005), 53.

³ Cynthia Bourgeault, *Wisdom Jesus*, 21.

have seen before. They touch the imagination and invite a transformation in perception.⁴

Another classic tool of a wisdom teacher is the use of parables. Parables are narratives, be they short or long that also invite a change in perception. They are good stories that draw people in and cause them to think about things in a different light. They do not invoke an external authority such as “Thus says the Lord.” They are invitational like aphorisms. Rather than saying “Do this” they encourage “Consider seeing it this way.” “Judge for yourself what is right.”⁵

As a Wisdom teacher Jesus had an emphasis on seeing that runs throughout his teachings. It is possible to have eyes and to be sighted, but not see. Some sighted people are blind. In Mark 8:18 Jesus said, “You have eyes, but do not see and you have ears and you do not hear, neither do you remember.” In Matthew 6: 22-23 and Luke 11: 34-35, Jesus said that the eye is the lamp of the body. In other words *how* you see determines the path that you walk. It is not so much what you see, but how you see that matters. Jesus’ wisdom teachings did not focus so much on morals or behavior as on a path of transformation, a different way of seeing the world and people that emerges out of a life lived centered in God.⁶

Most Wisdom teachers, or sages as they were called in Jesus’ time taught the way of conventional wisdom. There was the wise way as opposed to the

⁴ Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*,70.

⁵ Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*,74.

⁶ Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*,74.

foolish way. Conventional wisdom is what everyone knows to be true and all cultures have it. An example in our culture might be "God never gives you more than you can handle" or "This is the land of equal opportunity." Jesus was unusual because he reversed the normal trend of promoting conventional wisdom that everyone knew to be true. Instead for him the broad way that most people followed was the one that leads to destruction. He spoke against his society's conventional wisdom regarding family, wealth, purity and religiosity. He spoke of the Pharisees who were thought to be the most religious and pure in his culture as unmarked graves, clean on the outside but corrupt on the inside. For Jewish people of his time graves were considered unclean and to be avoided. To speak of Pharisees in this way was shocking at the time. Jesus' wisdom teachings were subversive and they offered an alternative wisdom. They were focused on another path and another way than conventional wisdom, or what everyone knew to be true, such as women in that time being unreliable witnesses or Samaritans as being dirty and heretical.⁷

We can notice that over the centuries of the Christian religion the church seems to have steered clear of the open ended, subversive tradition of Jesus' wisdom teachings and opted instead for simple, concrete creeds and practices that give definitive answers, rather than inviting discovery, intellectual wrestling and insight.

⁷ Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 75.

Matthew 20: 1-15 , NRSV

“For the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who went out early in the morning to hire laborers for his vineyard. After agreeing with the laborers for the usual daily wage, he sent them into his vineyard. When he went out about nine o’clock, he saw others standing idle in the marketplace; and he said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard, and I will pay you whatever is right.’ So they went. When he went out again about noon and about three o’clock, he did the same. And about five o’clock he went out and found others standing around; and he said to them, ‘Why are you standing here idle all day?’ They said to him, ‘Because no one has hired us.’ He said to them, ‘You also go into the vineyard.’ When evening came, the owner of the vineyard said to his manager, ‘Call the laborers and give them their pay, beginning with the last and then going to the first.’ When those hired about five o’clock came, each of them received the usual daily wage. Now when the first came, they thought they would receive more; but each of them also received the usual daily wage. And when they received it, they grumbled against the landowner, saying, ‘These last worked only one hour, and you have made them equal to us who have borne the burden of the day and the scorching heat.’ But he replied to one of them, ‘Friend, I am doing you no wrong; did you not agree with me for the usual daily wage? Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to this last the same as I give to you. Am I not allowed to do what I choose with what belongs to me? Or are you envious because I am generous?’

Is God like this or is God more like a judge and a lawgiver?

The Wisdom Way or path that Jesus offers requires more of us than worship or correct beliefs. Jesus' invitation to disciples was not to believe but to follow. Christianity as a path requires dying to an old self and becoming a new person, conquest of our ego, and new eyes with which to see the world. It involves a call not only to worship, but to emulate Jesus. No wonder Jesus called this path of transformation "the narrow way" or the road less travelled. Faith as transformation is complicated and costly. Disciples today need to interpret what following Jesus means for a new age. Author Robin R. Meyers, a United Church of Christ pastor in Oklahoma City says that the operative question for the new age is not, "Do you love Jesus?" but, "Has Jesus ever been a radically disturbing and transforming presence in your life?"⁸

Handout

Luke 10: 25-37, (NRSV)

Just then a lawyer stood up to test Jesus. "Teacher," he said, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?" He said to him, "What is written in the law? What do you read there?" He answered, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself." And he said to him, "You have given the right answer; do this, and you will live." But wanting to justify himself, he asked Jesus,

⁸ Robin R. Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, 145.

“And who is my neighbor?” Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and fell into the hands of robbers, who stripped him, beat him, and went away, leaving him half dead. Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him, he passed by on the other side. So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. But a Samaritan while traveling came near him; and when he saw him, he was moved with pity. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, having poured oil and wine on them. Then he put him on his own animal, brought him to an inn, and took care of him. The next day he took out two denarii, gave them to the innkeeper, and said, ‘Take care of him; and when I come back, I will repay you whatever more you spend.’ Which of these three, do you think, was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of the robbers?” He said, “The one who showed him mercy.” Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think Jesus taught so often with parables?
2. Is growing in spiritual awareness important for people today? Why?
3. If we were going to cast the parable of the Good Samaritan in our modern time, who might the characters be today ?

Appendix B

Week Two: Jesus as Liberator

Jesus broke all sorts of social barriers and taboos of his day and culture by talking with women (John 4:1-40, Luke 10:38-42, Mark 7: 25-30), lepers (Mark 1:40-45), tax collectors (Luke 19:1-10) and others on the fringe of society. He engaged them in respectful theological conversations and he seemed to see the full humanity of all different sorts of people, both men and women, even if they had been dehumanized by the culture of the day. Jesus was open to interacting with powerful, wealthy people for spiritual transformation too, such as Nicodemus (John 3: 1-21), Joseph of Arimathea (Matt. 27:57), or Zacchaeus (Luke 19: 1-10). He seemed to be open all sorts of people.

Jesus taught women such as Mary Magdalene (John 10:10-18, Mt. 28:1-10) and Mary of Bethany as trusted, respected disciples (Luke 10: 38-42). Women, who were almost at the bottom of the scale of the patriarchal social system feature prominently in his ministry, understood his teachings and remained with him until the end (Mt. 27:55, Mark 15:40, Luke 23: 49, John 19:25). The Samaritan woman whom Jesus had a deep conversation with at a well ran to tell the people of her village about Jesus and many came to see and hear Jesus for themselves because of her testimony. That is the definition of an apostle, to go and tell. When the women followers are mentioned, such as Jesus' mother ,Mary, Salome, Phoebe or Mary Magdalene, Mary Magdalene is always mentioned first, indicating that she was an extremely important and

respected disciple.⁹ She has been depicted over time as a penitent prostitute, but there is nothing in scripture to indicate such a thing. It was Pope Gregory the Great who put forth that idea in a sixth century sermon and it stuck. In all four gospels women keep vigil at the crucifixion and they go early on Easter morning to Jesus' tomb. The details of the visits on Easter morning vary from gospel to gospel, but the most detailed account is in the gospel of John when Mary Magdalene is the first witness to the empty tomb and to see the risen Christ. Christ tells her not to cling to him. Jesus' command not to hold on to him might indicate to Mary Magdalene and to us that the risen Jesus cannot be held and controlled. If Jesus is held by preconceived standards and expectations then he is limited in what he can offer. Bruce Epperly writes that resurrection is a living and evolving field of force that still surprises and will continue to surprise us as God seeks to embrace humankind with healing love.¹⁰ Maybe part of what we are doing today is following that first command of Jesus after the resurrection by considering together in this beloved community where we might possibly be clinging to ways of understanding Jesus that no longer have life for us or are no longer liberating for all people. As we think together we can consider who Jesus is for us in the twenty-first century.

One idea that has become prevalent about Jesus is that he was obedient to God's plan for him to die for our sins through the event of the crucifixion. Theologian, Carter Heyward writes in a thought provoking way about this

⁹ Spong, *Jesus for the Non-Religious*, 261.

¹⁰ Epperly, *Process Theology*, 76.

concept of obedience. I invite you to consider her thoughts. She writes that maybe there is a more fully divine and human dynamic at the heart of our life in the Spirit than obedience, which she sees as a spiritually lazy and often damaging response to the love of God. Suppose that Jesus or Martin Luther King, Jr. had simply done what the religious and secular leaders of their time had dictated. Maybe obedience is a misleading metaphor that suggests that God is a power over us rather than a Spirit with us; that God speaks down to us more than God yearns for our companionship, that God needs obedient children more than courageous disciples. Together with compassion, Carter Heyward says that courage is our strongest, most reliable resource in the struggle against evil. And how do we learn courage? Through example, mentors, stories, risk taking, trial and error, making mistakes and growing through them. There are many ways to learn courage. Obedience to those with power over us is not one of them, says Carter Heyward.¹¹

Jesus tried to teach people that they could approach God, find God within and be empowered by that. He breathed on the disciples to convey the Holy Spirit (John 20:22). Apostolic succession was originally the transmission of the awakening of the Spirit from spiritual leaders to disciples, like Jesus did with his followers when he breathed the power of the Spirit on them.¹² This is very different from the idea of apostolic succession being strictly controlled by a line

¹¹ Carter Heyward, *Saving Jesus from Those Who Are Right: Rethinking What it Means to be Christian* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999), 81.

¹² Paul R. Smith, *Integral Christianity: The Spirit's Call to Evolve*, 107.

of male bishops who pass it from one to the other. It has more the sense that the Spirit blows where she will as described in John 3: 8. Scholar and theologian Marcus Borg says that Jesus was a “Spirit Person”, so in tune with God that he transmitted God’s grace and power to all who were open to receive it. He inspired and healed people drawing from that inner power and Jesus is a model for humanity, giving us a person to follow and to emulate. We follow someone that we love and trust.¹³ Is it possible that Jesus wanted his followers to know that they were meant to be empowered too? Is it possible that that aspect of his teaching has not been as emphasized as other things? He told people that they would do greater deeds than he did (John 14:12). Jesus told people that those who come to him would have streams of living water flow from their hearts (John 7:38). Pastor and author, Paul R. Smith says that streams of living water sounds like a description of a spiritual awakening that comes from deep within, from the Spirit already present there that then flows outward. It sounds like a Spirit Filled life that Jesus said we could have.¹⁴ Jesus said that the people he taught were the light of the world (Mt. 5: 14), not that they would become the light if they believed hard enough. Jesus said in John 16: 12-13, as he prepared his disciples for his earthly death that he had more things to teach them but they could not bear those lessons now. Jesus said when the Spirit of Truth comes it will guide us in all truth. Paul R. Smith points out that it seems that he was saying that the Spirit would never stop teaching us and that when we have born

¹³ Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time*, 31-32.

¹⁴ Smith, *Integral Christianity*, 117.

one stage, we would be ready to move on to the next, moving with ever expanding waves of love and liberation.¹⁵ The apostle Paul also spoke of the gradual change and transformation involved in a spiritual path when he wrote in 2 Corinthians 3:18, "All of us, with unveiled faces, seeing the glory of God as though reflected in a mirror, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another." That is empowering, that we have the potential of moving towards looking more like Christ as we are changed by the power of Holy Spirit in degrees over time.

I would like to share author and pastor Paul R. Smith's idea with you that Jesus wants more from us than to honor and admire him. That is only a first step. You need to get to know a teacher before you can learn from them. The important next step is to learn to be *like* the instructor, to understand that you have potential to know what the teacher knows, to feel what he feels and to do what the teacher does. I am not suggesting that we will approach the level of Jesus. He was a world changing avatar. I'm not wanting us to be sacrilegious but only to consider Smith's idea that honoring and learning about the teacher is only step one. I suggest to you that Jesus had greater faith in you than you may realize to become like him because as Paul R. Smith says, you already are like him at your deepest levels.¹⁶

There is a book by theologian Walter Wink called *The Human Being Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man*. The name that Jesus used for

¹⁵ Smith, *Integral Christianity*, 88-89.

¹⁶ Smith, *Integral Christianity*, 248-49.

himself, translated from Jesus' language of Aramaic is "The Son of the Man." It could also be translated as "the human being." In the introduction to the book Mr. Wink asks, "Why have so many of us sold out to miniaturized versions of ourselves?" Wink points out that the expression that Jesus used as virtually his only form of self reference was "the son of the man." Not once in the Gospels does he refer to himself by his own name and no one else calls him "the son of the man." The expression appears only on Jesus' lips. Some scholars say that it is just an alternative to saying "I" or "myself and people like me" but no one but Jesus made this phrase an exclusive self-designation. Historically churches have never given the phrase much attention, preferring other title such as "Lord" or "the only son of God." ¹⁷

Wink thinks that the place to begin to understand what this expression meant to Jesus is in the Book of Ezekiel, which contains an astonishing vision which was experienced during a time of exile in a foreign land.¹⁸ (Handout) This imagery is at the heart of Ezekiel's vision:

And above the dome over their heads there was something like a throne, in appearance like sapphire; and seated above the likeness of a throne was something that seemed like a human form. Upward from what appeared like the loins I saw something like gleaming amber, something that looked like fire enclosed all around; and downward from what looked like the loins I saw something that looked like fire, and there was a splendor all around. Like the

¹⁷Wink, *Human Being*, 19.

¹⁸ Wink, *Human Being*, 23.

bow in a cloud on a rainy day, such was the appearance of the splendor all round. This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of the Lord. When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone.

He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. (1:26-2:1, NRSV)

Wink highlights the part of the vision that says that there was something that seemed like a human form in the Godly vision. He points out that of course God is not human, but in this passage God seems to be turning a human face toward Ezekiel. Wink points out that humans are not capable of comprehending the whole fullness of God. The face God turned towards us is only a part which we can bear, that can coax us to our fulfillment as God's people. Could it be that this is because the task that God has set for human beings is to become more fully human, or more humane? Is it possible that Walter Wink's hunch is correct and that Jesus was greatly influenced by this reading in the book of Ezekiel? If it is true then we should pay attention to Jesus' chosen self description, the human being.

Wink draws fascinating ideas forth from the vision of Ezekiel. He notes that both male and female verbs and pronouns are used throughout the vision, where one would expect exclusively masculine words. Wink speculates that this is because Ezekiel is seeing the Fully Human Being in all its completeness. To say that males and females are made in God's image as in Genesis 1, indicates that there is something of God in our mundane existence but that we are not yet

fully human. We are able to become more human because of the divine spark within us. Something of God turns a human face towards us, as in the vision. Our goal is not to become something we are not- divine- but to become what we truly are-human. We are not required to be divine, flawless or perfect. We are invited to simply become human, which means growing through our sins and mistakes, learning by trial and error, being redeemed time and time again, becoming ourselves, scars and all.¹⁹ Wink points out that in the vision God apparently will not converse with people who are groveling.²⁰ The Holy One does not want a servile mentality. Ezekiel says, "When I saw it, I fell on my face, and I heard the voice of someone. He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you. (1:26-2:1) This certainly goes against the grain of what many of us have been taught in church, that we are unworthy to approach God.

Wink says that we are part of a self-surpassing system that we can scarcely comprehend, with God prompting us from within and pushing us from behind. We need God's help in transforming ourselves and authentic Christianity should leave people stronger, not dehumanized.²¹ I believe that Jesus was passionate for people to understand the transformation that was possible as we grow and reach our human potential with God as our companion and guide.

¹⁹ Wink, *Human Being*, 29.

²⁰ Wink, *Human Being*, 31.

²¹ Wink, *Human Being*, 37.

Wink believes that God wants to be a catalyst for transformation for us so that we discover the power that is latent within us.

Wink writes, "Once all authority becomes invested only in Jesus, however, what happens to the sovereign freedom he evoked in his disciples? What becomes of the freedom to 'judge for yourselves what is right.' (Luke 12:57) It is indeed shocking how Christology has been used to avoid the clear intent of Jesus! So the astonishing freedom of the Human Being was sabotaged in the interests of institutional harmony and rule by law."²²

One of the things that Jesus talked most about is the "Kingdom of God." This was the way life on earth would be transformed when God's vision for peace and justice comes to pass. It is like a mustard seed that is small and even considered a weedy nuisance, but it grows profusely. Scholar John Dominic Crossan says that a better translation than "The Kingdom of God" from Jesus' native Aramaic is "the Companionship of Empowerment." The Aramaic word for Kingdom is *malkuta*, formed around the root *kut*, which carries strong connotations of *power with* rather than *power over*. If Crossan is correct then Gospel empowerment was to be circular, mutual, interactive, mobilizing diverse gifts, and interpersonal.²³

Jesus said that the Realm of God, or the Companionship of Empowerment is like a woman who adds yeast to unleavened bread. Theologian, Catherine Keller points out that the image of the woman hiding yeast in her dough is an

²² Wink, *Human Being*, 74.

²³ O'Murchu, *Christianity's Dangerous Memory*, 30.

image of empowerment and a story of what is possible for people. Yeast was thought to be an unclean substance for Jewish people of Jesus' time so the image is a little bit threatening. The baker-woman initiates a process with the yeast which causes the lifeless mound of dough to change and to rise. Anyone who has ever kneaded bread dough knows that it is pretty hard work. It requires the massaging effort of the woman and the interaction with the flour. Grace within the Companionship of Empowerment needs our cooperation. It is not power over us but empowerment *of* us. Keller says that in all times and places Jesus offers a new chance and a possibility for us to become something more. The realm of God that Jesus spoke so often about enfolds us into a great force for good and shows us what is possible for human beings.²⁴

Discussion Questions

1. Why would Jesus say that living water would flow from our hearts?
2. How might it impact the world if we took being empowered by the Holy Spirit more seriously?
3. Do you think of your Christian pathway in terms of waiting to be saved or in terms of helping to bring about the realm and vision of God with God's help?
4. What was the purpose or meaning of Jesus' life?

²⁴ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 149.

Appendix C

Week Three- Jesus the Christ

Sometimes it sounds as though Christ is Jesus' last name. Christ is a title that means God's anointed, so Jesus **the** Christ captures the meaning better than Jesus Christ. The idea comes from the Hebrew word *mashiah* or messiah as we know it. Drawing from ancient Jewish history someone or something is anointed by pouring oil on it in order to commission it for a particular job and also to recognize their sacredness. Kings, priests and prophets were anointed. Oil was poured over dishes that were to be used in the Temple to sanctify them and make them holy vessels for a specific purpose in the Jewish Temple. Jesus was a Jew in an environment that included Greek and Roman people, or a Greco-Roman world. The New Testament was written in Greek. There was no word or concept for messiah in the Greek language. The closest word the Greeks had to the idea of anointing with oil was *christos*, which meant to smear, plaster a wall or give a rub down. This is where the word "Christ" derives from. With that idea "to smear" you can kind of picture someone being anointed with oil.¹

Last week we talked about the way Jesus most often referred to himself which was, translated from the Aramaic, "the son of the man" which theologian and scholar Walter Wink says could also be rendered "the human being." Wink believes that Jesus used this name for himself so that the disciples would know

¹ Gregory Riley, "Jesus and Christ," lecture, Claremont School of Theology, Claremont, CA, September 7, 2004.

that as human beings they too could be empowered by God. We also considered something else that was a central concern of Jesus' teaching "the kingdom of God." Bible Scholar John Dominic Crossan says that a better translation from the Aramaic that Jesus spoke is "The Companionship of Empowerment." Author Diarmuid O'Murchu writes that the pyramid had to become a circle and that gospel empowerment was meant to be circular, mutual, interactive, mobilizing diverse gifts, interpersonal and lateral. The Jesus of the Companionship of Empowerment champions earthly and personal transformation through justice, equality, and the fresh empowerment of all who have been oppressed and marginalized. Rather than a divine rescuer of passive and sinful people, Jesus is a wise and empowering catalyst for new hope and transformation. Jesus said to seek first the realm of God which is an organic, evolutionary, ongoing system that needs to be re-envisioned and re-appropriated in each new generation and adapted to different contexts and cultures. Jesus did not seem interested in policing people's moral behavior so much as he wanted to liberate people from all forms of oppression and so he tried to help people see their potential for empowerment.² Jesus is the Christ, God's anointed. No one that we know of more fully embodied God's Spirit and vision. He also serves as a model of inspiration for us as fallible human beings when he says in John 14:12, "You will do greater things than this." Maybe that is a part of what the Holy Spirit or the Spirit of Christ does for us, it draws us to

² O'Murchu, *Christianity's Dangerous Memory*, 35.

respond out of our higher selves. It invites us to our fullest humanity which is exemplified in Jesus. Walter Wink says "It is much easier to let someone else carry this supernova of soul than to open ourselves to its birth in us."³

The Christ Spirit is present across time and locations. It is possible that is why Jesus told Mary Magdalene not to cling to him after his resurrection. The Christic Spirit cannot be confined to one local or time. Theologian, Bruce Epperly says that Jesus is not bound by our images of his mission, our understanding of his resurrection, or the first century world view. Jesus the Christ continues to inspire us in unexpected ways, breaking down the walls that confine his message to the orthodox, saved or righteous. John Cobb and David Ray Griffin say that "Christ can be most fully present and effective as people decide for or against it and as they open to this presence."⁴

I invite you to consider some of the thoughts of process theologian, Catherine Keller. She writes that the invitation from God for the divine gift of the possible is what we call Christ. It is a way of naming the universal wisdom, the *logos*, or the *Sophia* of God. When thinking of the wisdom of God or the wisdom of the universe incarnate in Jesus, Christians call this Christ. Jesus the Christ. But, Catherine Keller writes, the *logos* seeks incarnation or materialization not just in Jesus but always and everywhere. Within Christianity the incarnation of God has often been seen as an exclusive event with Jesus as "the only son of God." Keller says that the whole purpose of this incarnation of God in Jesus was

³ Wink, *Human Being*, 100.

⁴ Epperly, *Process Theology*, 76.

to open up a new intimacy with the divine. She notes that in the gospel of John incarnation, or "becoming flesh" is described as an open ended process when John writes "to all who received him he gave the power to become children of God." (John 1:13) In other words to embrace this Christ spirit is to become a son or daughter of God. Keller states that the standard notion that only Jesus is the son of God goes directly against the text of John. Keller says that classical theology has confused the uniqueness of the Christ event with an exclusive and changeless revelation. The light of Christ extends, she says, infinitely outward in all directions, high and wide and deep. When Christianity describes it as exclusive the glory itself is blocked because glory depends on embodiment. Jesus said, "For this I came into the world, to witness to the truth." He embodied truth as divinely and as fully as any human possibly could, in his living and his dying. We are still feeling his energy and are inspired by it and drawn to it. Jesus did this so that all we who follow him would also embody and enact the truth that he taught about with his parables, narratives, aphorisms, healing and courage, as best and joyfully as we can. The Christ light is alive only to the extent that it is embodied. John Dominic Crossan says that Jesus as the Christ is a parable of God. He says that parables give God room. They are not portraits, but something that invites us in to our own genesis or possibilities for becoming. They are not static, but interactive, and open ended. Catherine Keller suggests

that if we are able to give God some space we might also become parables of God in some way.⁵

Theologians Bruce Epperly, Walter Wink and others make the point that the uniqueness of Jesus the Christ cannot exclude God's presence in other cultures and religious traditions. Other cultural and faith communities will experience and describe the presence of God's vision in their own unique and life-transforming ways. Bruce Epperly writes that rather than alienating us from other religious traditions Christ's message invites us to grow in wisdom and stature in dialogue with the diversity of faith experiences. Wherever truth and healing are present, God is its source.⁶ Writer and pastor Paul R. Smith says that Jesus was a man from Galilee who was full of God. He was able to transmit God's presence and power to all who were open to receive it.⁷ The gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke are similar in their stories and style. Scholars call them the *synoptic* gospels from a Greek word that means "seen together." John is quite different from the other three. Paul R. Smith writes that in the gospel of John Jesus speaks as the universal or cosmic Christ. When Jesus says I am the bread of life, the way, the good shepherd, the light of the world and the resurrection, he is not speaking as the historical person, Jesus, says Smith, but as the Christ, the image of the invisible God, in whom all things hold together. In John Jesus proclaims "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to God

⁵ Keller, *On the Mystery*, 150-51.

⁶ Epperly, *Process Theology*, 65.

⁷ Smith, *Integral Christianity*, 242.

but through me.” This statement has been traditionally been understood as limiting the path to God to the human person Jesus. Paul Smith writes that in this passage Jesus was speaking as the universal mind of God or the Christ.⁸ A few years ago our congregation hosted the Morrow-McCombs Speaker Series. This is a group that promotes interfaith education and dialogue. The speakers I am remembering that evening were called “The Interfaith Amigos.” The amigos included UCC pastor, Don Mackenzie, Jewish Rabbi, Ted Falcon and Muslim Sheikh, Jamal Rahman. All three men shared wonderful insights and stories that evening. I especially recall Jamal Rahman, the Muslim Sheikh talking about the statement of Jesus from the gospel of John “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one can come to God but through me.” He reminded us of when Moses encountered God by the burning bush in the story from the book of Exodus. Moses asked God what he should say when people ask him “what is God’s name?” God said “I AM what I AM. Tell the people I AM sent you.” Jamal Rahman suggested that perhaps Jesus was making the I AM statements in John as one who speaks as a reflection of or representative of the universal face of God. When you think about it I AM is an open ended description. We cannot define God with our human categories and words. Jamal Rahman said that instead of thinking of this statement as making Christianity the exclusive path to God we can affirm that all people who encounter I AM or the universal mind of God are on the path to God. We can also affirm that I AM is available to anyone

⁸ Smith, *Integral Christianity*, 243.

in an authentic, loving, spiritual path, be it Native American Spirituality, Jewish faith, Muslim or others. Jesus revealed God consciousness in a particular time and place in history. He is **our** beloved spiritual and cultural path and we are free to follow, grow on the path and sing praises to Jesus, the great revealer of God for us. We do not have to denigrate other people's different religious paths though. We are blessed to have the person of Jesus of Nazareth to emulate and follow. Jesus provides a prototype for humanity. We are also blessed and inspired by Jesus the Christ, who offers the power to become children of God to all who receive it.

Jesus most fully reflects God for us, but is it possible that Jesus is not the only human to have manifested the empowering Christ spirit? As the apostle Paul said "I live, yet not I, but Christ lives within me." (Gal. 2:20) Martin Luther said that each one of us has the potential to become a "little Christ" revealing God's grace by allowing divine energy and possibilities to flow through our lives to bring healing and wholeness to others. Jesus leads us to this possibility when he says "the realm of God is within." (Luke 17:21) You are the vessel to receive the Spirit of God, which desires to heal and transform the world.⁹ In Philippians 2:5 the apostle Paul tells us "Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus." That tells us what we are supposed to be doing on the way, or on the spiritual path that Jesus offers to us, is not just admiring Jesus but acquiring his consciousness. Once more and more people do that, the kingdom, or realm of

⁹ Epperly, *Process Theology*, 64.

God that Jesus spoke of will manifest more fully on earth. Jim Marion, a contemporary author and mystic says that the Kingdom of God is really a metaphor for a state of consciousness. It is a new way of looking at the world with transformed awareness that really does make the world a different place.¹⁰ When Jesus said in the gospel of John, I am in God, God is in you, you are in God, we are in each other he does not present this as an exclusive privilege, but as something to be shared by all human beings. Jim Marion writes that as we move up the spiritual ladder, with Christ leading us on, we come closer to reaching the highest level of spiritual consciousness which is the kingdom of heaven. This spiritual growth is hard work. In Luke 9:62 Jesus likened it to a shoulder to the plow. Jim Marion says that it is through the continual baptisms into death and rebirth that Christians grow spiritually at every level.¹¹

In summary of the past three classes- Jesus offers a spiritual path for the twenty-first century that involves seeing the world differently as our perceptions are changed to be more Christ like and inclusive. Jesus was a master wisdom teacher who used interactive, open-ended aphorisms and parables to help people discover new spiritual insights. Jesus wanted people, especially the oppressed and marginalized to be liberated from systems of oppression and empowered from within by the Holy Spirit. He taught often about the kingdom of God which is a realm of shalom that can be realized on earth, through working together in mutuality and non violent resistance to evil systems of domination.

¹⁰ Bourgeault, *Wisdom Jesus*, 30.

¹¹ Bourgeault, *Wisdom Jesus*, 32.

Jesus manifests the logos, the wisdom of God or the Christ for us. Christ is a manifestation of I AM or God which was realized in the human being Jesus. Jesus' disciples still continue to experience the Christ light through Jesus today. Hopefully we do our best follow the spiritual path that Jesus sets before us, reinterpreted and re-appropriated for our time and cultural context. As we follow the way in 2013 and beyond we hope to grow in wisdom and become more and more like Christ ourselves so that we can be agents to help heal and transform the wounds of the earth with God as a patient, compassionate companion who inspires us forward.

Small Group Discussion Questions

1. In what ways, if any, did the life of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. or Mother Theresa reflect the Christ Spirit?
2. The apostle Paul writes of putting on the "mind of Christ" and growing in Christ Consciousness. What do you understand that to mean? Is putting on the mind of Christ possible for Christians of any generation?
3. Did Jesus expect more from us and have more confidence in our ability to grow in wisdom than we may have imagined? Can you take a moment to reflect on what that means for your own spiritual journey?

Appendix D

Survey Questions

Name _____
(your personal responses will be kept anonymous)

1. Jesus' purpose in life was to die to save us from our sins.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree Other: _____

2. Obedience is an important response to God because God offers one right path for each of us.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree Other: _____

3. Jesus is the only son of God.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree Other: _____

4. Jesus chose only twelve male disciples.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree Other: _____

5. Christians should be meek and passive. That is what turning the other cheek and going the extra mile is all about.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree Other: _____

6. The incarnation of the Christ light occurred only once in history and that was in Jesus. The light of Christ or the Wisdom of the Universe no longer seeks embodiment.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree Other: _____

7. The source of empowerment that Jesus offers is found in his death, rather than his life.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree Other: _____

8. Jesus would not want things within the church to change.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree Other: _____

9. Jesus saw people as weak and sinful.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree Other: _____

10. Jesus taught with parables and narratives because he wanted to give people definitive answers.

Strongly Agree Agree Neutral Disagree Strongly Disagree Other: _____

You are invited to the Adult Education class "Jesus as a Spiritual Path for the 21st Century" on Sundays September 15, 22, and 29, at 11:30 a.m. in the Fireside Room to discuss these topics further. Thank you for filling out this survey.

Bibliography

Avens, Cynthia, and Richard Zelley. *Walking the Path of ChrsitoSophia: Exploring the Hidden Tradition in Christian Spirituality*. Bloomington, IN: AuthorHouse, 2005.

Borg, Marcus J. *The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith; How We Can be Passionate Believers Today*. San Francisco, CA: Harper SanFrancisco, 2003.

_____. *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2006.

_____. *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the the Heart of Contemporary Faith*. San Francisco: Harper San Francico, 1994.

Bourgeault, Cynthia. *The Wisdom Jesus: Transforming Heart and Mind; A New Perspective on Christ and His Message*. Boston: New Seeds Books, 2008.

Burt, Susan. "Christian Education and the Imaginative Spirit." In *The Emerging Christian Way: Thoughts, Stories, and Wisdom for a Faith of Transformation*, ed. Michael Schwartzentruber, 201-18. Kelowna, BC: CopperHouse, 2006.

Cobb, John B, Jr, and David Ray Griffin. *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1976.

Epperly, Bruce G. *Emerging Process: Adventurous Theology for a Missional Church*. Cleveland, TN: Parson's Porch Books, 2011.

_____. *Process Theology: A Guide for the Perplexed*. London: T& T Clark, 2011.

Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum, 1970.

- Harpur, Tom. "New Creeds." In *The Emerging Christian Way: Thoughts, Stories, and Wisdom for a Faith of Transformation*, ed. Michael Schwartzentruber, 51-64. Kelowna, BC: CopperHouse, 2006.
- Hooks, Bell. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Keller, Catherine. *On the Mystery: Discerning God in Process*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008.
- Marion, Jim. *The Death of the Mythic God: The Rise of Evolutionary Spirituality*. Charlottesville, VA: Hampton Roads Publishing, 2004.
- McDaniel, Jay. *What is Process Thought?: Seven Answers to Seven Questions*. Claremont, CA: P & F Press, 2008.
- Meyers, Robin R. *Saving Jesus from the Church: How to Stop Worshipping Christ and Start Following Jesus*. New York: HarperOne, 2009.
- Nolan, Albert. *Jesus Before Christianity*. Maryknoll: NY: Orbis Books, 1978.
- O'Murchu, Diarmuid. *Catching Up With Jesus: A Gospel Story for Our Times*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2005.
- _____. *Christianity's Dangerous Memory: A Rediscovery of the Revolutionary Jesus*. New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2011.
- Panikkar, Raimon. *Christophany: The Fullness of Man*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004.

- Reilly, Patricia Lynn. *A God Who Looks Like me :Discovering a Woman-Affirming Spirituality*. New York: Ballantine Books., 1995.
- Rubenstein, Richard E. *When Jesus Became God :The Struggle to Define Christianity during the Last Days of Rome*. New York: Harcourt Brace, 1999.
- Ruether, Rosemary Radford. *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology*. With a New Introduction. Boston: Beacon Press, 1993.
- Russell, Letty M. *Church in the Round: Feminist Interpretation of the Church*. Louisville: Westminster /John Knox Press, 1993.
- Smith, Paul R. *Integral Christianity:The Spirit's Call to Evolve*. St. Paul, MN: P Paragon House, 2011.
- Soelle, Dorothee, and Luise Schottroff. *Jesus of Nazareth*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002.
- Spong, John Shelby. *Jesus for the Non-Religious*. New York: HarperOne , 2007.
- Steinberg, Shirley R., ed. *Diversity and Multiculturalism: A Reader*. New York: Peter Lang, 2009.
- Suchocki, Marjorie Hewitt. "What is Process Theology?: A Conversation with Marjorie," <http://www.processandfaith.org>, 2003. Accessed March 19, 2014.
- Wink, Walter. *The Human Being: Jesus and the Enigma of the Son of the Man*. Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2002.